STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—
PLANET
stories
MAY
25¢
CAPTIVES of the
THIEVE-STAR
A Novelet of Rich
and Lovelies Galactica
by JAMES H. SCHMITZ
Also H. G. STITES
FRANK B. LONG
CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

VOL. 4, NO. 12 • A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE • MAY, 1951

▶ *Two Gripping Novelets of Space-Adventure*

CAPTIVES OF THE THIEVE-STAR . . . . . ***James H. Schmitz*** **4**

Space-nomads, gypsies of the Interstellar Void, Peer and Chonnak took what the star-tides tossed up—but when they grappled the derelict Ra-Twelve, dreaming of salvagers' gold, they hooked o death-prize . . . o doom-ship, hounted by the Yomm, pursued by the Mysterious Nine!

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T. T. SCOTT *President* JEROME BIXBY, *Editor* MALCOLM REISS, *General Manager*

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THE VIZIGRAPH

Take off your hat! 'Tenshun . . . eyes *right!* We shall now observe an anniversary.

One year ago PLANET STORIES leaped into our lap, crying, "I'm yours, yours . . . do with me as you will!" Since that momentous embrace we have acquired the suspicion of an ulcer, a bank account, a tendency to shriek at sudden noises, and a good deal of pleasure from the work. It's been fun . . . and looks to continue to be fun. So may we now, for the record, state timidly our belief that the present issue of PS is one of the best to come along for quite a while; and that it, together with the last—the March—issue, constitutes a statement of aims . . . a level of science-adventure quality and entertainment which we hope to hit every time from now on? Thank you kindly . . . and your comments and suggestions are, as always, welcome.

No pic-awards this trip, for the simple reason that the new bi-monthly schedule puts issue B on the presses before issue A hits the stands; thus no letters on A can be received—and no votes on A's letters counted—in time for inclusion in B.

So next issue we'll announce the winners for A . . . darn it, I mean for the March issue. And the following issue—September—will announce the winners among the letter-writers represented in this issue.

—J.B.

DOUBLE-CLUTCHES WITH EASE . . .

220 Shoreward Dr.,
Great Neck, L. I., N. Y.

DEAR MR. BIXBY:

Firstly, of course, my apologies for the use of the second-sheets. Nothing better is available for the present, except for some American Express stationery that is all cluttered up with letterheads, slogans, and the like. Please stay with me, and I promise some real hotsy-dandy eggshell next time.

This letter is, I am afraid, going to be as close to a paen of praise as my letters are ever going to get. That, naturally, is your fault. Anyhow, from front to back, she stacks up like this:

The broad on the cover is nicer than usual. Good. The cover itself is interpretative, rather than illustrative. Good. Now, if we can only get Anderson to devote a little more time to detailing his secondary figures (hero, to you), I can stop griping altogether.

The MoToR ad is tastefully laid out, and conveys a maximum of information. I went right out and ripped the Dynaflow out of the neighbor's Buick, and replaced it with a Ford clutch. Now he double-clutches with ease. If we could only get the damn thing to move, he'd really be set.

Why not try using a masthead like on Two S-A Books? I've been staring at that old Doolin cut too long.

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CAPTIVES *of the* THIEVE-STAR

A Novelet by JAMES H. SCHMITZ

When Peer and Channok grappled the derelict Ra-Twelve, they hooked a death-prize—haunted by the Yomm, stalked by the Mysterious Nine!

THE CELEBRATION OF THE wedding of Peer and Channok had to be cut a little short, because a flock of police-boats from Irrek showed up at detector-range about midway. But it was carried off with a flourish nevertheless.

The oxygen-bubble in the small moon-crater was filled with colorful solidographs, creating the impression of an outdoor banquet hall. The best bands playing in the Empire that night unwittingly contributed their efforts, and food and drink were beyond reproach.

With a fraction of a second to spare, the Reaper talked first . . .

Though somewhat dazed throughout, Channok was startled to discover at one point that the thick carpets on which he stood were a genuine priceless Gaifornaab weave—and no solidographs either! The eighty-four small ships of the space-rat tribe—or voyageurs, as they distinctly preferred to be called—lined up along the outer edges of the banquet hall looked eerily out of place to him; but Peer didn't seem to mind. Her people rarely did go far away from their ships, and the lawless, precarious life they led made that an advisable practice.

It would be up to him now, Channok reflected, beaming down on Peer, to educate her into customs and attitudes more fitting for the wife of a regular citizen of the Empire and probable future member of the Imperial Secret Service—

And then, suddenly, the whole ceremony seemed to be over! A bit puzzled by the abruptness with which everybody had begun to pack up and leave, Channok was standing beside the ramp of his own ship, the *Asteroid*—an honest, licensed trader—when Santis strolled over to talk to him. Santis was Peer's father and the pint-sized chieftain of the tribe.

"Didn't tell you before, son," he remarked, "because you were already nervous enough. But as soon as they finish collapsing the bubble, you'll have about six minutes to get your *Asteroid* aloft and off this moon before the cops from Irrek arrive!"

"I heard you, Pop, and everything's packed!" Peer called down from the open lock of the *Asteroid*. "Come up and kiss me good-by and we'll seal her up!"

Frowning suspiciously, Channok followed Santis up the ramp. "Why should I worry about cops?" he inquired, looking down at the two little people while they briefly embraced. Peer came about up to his shoulder, though perfectly formed, and Santis was an inch or two shorter. The tribe didn't run to bulk. "Nobody's hunting for me!"

"Not yet, son," Santis conceded. He twirled his fierce brown mustache-tips thoughtfully and glanced at Peer.

"If you're passing anywhere near Old Nameless, you might cache that special cargo you're carrying for me there," he told her. "Around the foot of the Mound. Too bulky for the ships I've got here! Put a dowser plate in with it, and I'll come pick it up with a transport sometime in the next four months."

"Yes, Pop," said Peer.

"The Fourth Voyageur Fleet will rendezvous at New Gyrnovaan next Terraspring. If you can talk this big lug into it, try to make it there, daughter!"

"We'll be there," promised Peer.

Channok cleared his throat impatiently. Not if he could help it, they wouldn't!

"Those cops are looking for the missing Crown Jewels of Irrek," Santis resumed, looking at him. "After they've opened you up from stem to stern to make sure you're not hiding them, they might apologize. And again they might not."

"Holy Satellites!" Channok said, stunned. "Did you actually—"

"Not I, son. I just master-mind these things. Some of the boys did the job. There goes the oxygen-bubble! Now will you get going?"

They got going, Channok speechless for once.

SOME TWO MONTHS LATER, he stood in the *Asteroid's* control room, watching a pale blur creep up along the starboard screen.

"That's not just one ship—that's at least a hundred!" he announced presently, somewhat startled. "Looks like they've turned out the entire Dardrean war-fleet! Wonder what's up?"

Peer laid the cargo list she was checking down on the desk and came over to look at the screen.

"Hm!" she said.

"It couldn't possibly have anything to do with us, could it?" he inquired, on a sudden alarming hunch. Being unfamiliar with the dialect used on Dardrea, he had left most of the bargaining there to her.

Peer shrugged. She showed the bland, innocent look of a ten-year-old child, but

that was habitual with her. On one occasion she'd been mistaken for his daughter, and at times he even had to remind himself that she'd been eighteen and a student at the Imperial Institute of Technology when he first met her there—and then unwittingly became Santis' tool in the abstraction of a small but important section of the IIT's top-secret experimental files! He'd been trying to counteract that little brigand's influence on Peer ever since, but he wasn't too sure of his degree of success so far.

"We took the Merchants Guild for plenty on our auction!" she admitted.

"Well," Channok frowned, "they'd hardly send a fleet after us for that."

"And, of course," added Peer, "we got the Duke of Dardrea's fabulous Coronet. Forgot to mention that. Perfectly legal, though! Some local crook swiped it and we took it in trade."

Channok winced. As a matter of fact, fencing *was* a perfectly legitimate business on Dardrea. But a man who planned to enter the Imperial Secret Service, as soon as he could save up the money to pay his way through the Academy, couldn't afford any stains on his past! Throughout the Empire, the Service was renowned in song and story as the one body of men who stood above the suspicion of reproach.

"The Duke won't know it's gone for another week," Peer consoled him. "Anyway, it looks to me as if those ships are beginning to pull off our course!"

There followed some seconds of tense observation.

"So they are," Channok acknowledged then. He mopped his forehead. "But I wish you wouldn't be quite so technical in your interpretation of local laws, Peer! Those babies are really traveling. Wonder who or what they're chasing?"

Three days later, as the *Asteroid* approached the area of the red giant sun of Old Nameless, where they were going to cache Santis' cargo for him—hot cargo, probably; and it would be a load off Channok's mind to get rid of it—they picked up the trail of the foundering spaceship *Ra-Twelve* and found part of the answer on board.

II

"IT SEEMED TO ME," CHANNOK remarked, watching the *Ra-Twelve* in the viewscreen before them, "as if her drives had cut off completely just then! But they're on again now. What do you think, crew-member Peer?"

"Let's just follow her a bit," Peer suggested. "I've seen ships act like that that were just running out of juice. But this one won't even answer signals!"

"It could be," Channok said hopefully, "a case of fair salvage! You might keep working the communicators, though . . ."

However, the *Ra-Twelve* continued to ignore them while she plodded on towards the distant red glare of the Nameless System like a blind, thirsty beast following its nose to a water-hole. Presently, she began a series of quavering zigzag motions, wandered aimlessly off her course, returned to it again on a few final puffs of invisible energy and at last went drifting off through space with her drives now obviously dead.

The *Asteroid* continued to follow at a discreet distance like a chunky vulture, watching. If there was anyone on board the *Ra-Twelve,* it almost had to be a ghost. Her rear lock was wide open, and the hull showed deep scars and marks of some recent space-action.

"But she wasn't really badly hurt," Channok pointed out. "What do you suppose could have happened to her crew?"

Peer gave him a nervous grin. "Maybe a space-ghost came on board!"

"You don't really believe those spooky voyageur stories, do you?" he said tolerantly.

"Sure I do—and so will you some day!" Peer promised him. "I'll tell you a few true ones just before your next sleep-period!"

"No, you won't," Channok said firmly. "Aside from space-ghosts, though, that crate has a downright creepy look to her. But I suppose I'd better go over and check, as soon as she slows down enough so we can latch on. And you're going to stay on the *Asteroid,* Peer."

"In a pig's eye, I am!" Peer said in-

dignantly. And though Channok wished to know if she had forgotten that he was the *Asteroid's* skipper, it turned out that this was one time he'd have to yield.

"Because, Channy dear," Peer said, her big dark eyes welling slow tears, "I'd just die if something happened to you over there and I was left all alone in space!"

"All you'd have to do," Channok said uncomfortably, "is to head the *Asteroid* for New Gyrnovaan, and you know it. Well—you've got to promise to stay right behind me, anyway!"

"Of course," promised Peer, the tears vanishing miraculously. "Santis says a wife should always stick with her husband in space, because he might lead her into a jam, all right, but nothing like the !!****!; !**!! jams she's likely to run into if she strays around by herself."

"Whereas Ship's Regulation 66-B says," said Channok with grim satisfaction, "that crew-member Peer gets her mouth washed out with soap just before the next sleep-period because of another uncontrolled lapse into vituperous profanity—and what was that comment?"

"That one was under my breath," said Peer, crestfallen, "so it doesn't count!"

WITHOUT making any particular remarks about it, both of them had fastened a brace of guns to their jet-harnesses. At close range—held thirty feet away against the *Asteroid's* ring-bumpers by a set of dock grapnels—the *Ra-Twelve's* yawning lock looked more than ever like the black mouth of a cavern in which something was lurking for them.

Channok went over first, propelled by a single squirt of his jets, and landed a little heavier than he had intended to. Peer, following instructions to keep right behind him, came down an instant later in the middle of his back. They got untangled hurriedly, stood up and started swiveling their helmet beams about the *Ra-Twelve's* storage lock.

It was practically empty. So was the big rack that had held the ship's single big lifeboat. There were some tools scattered around. They kicked at them thoughtfully, looked at each other and started forward through an open door up a dark passageway, switching their lights ahead and from side to side.

There was a locked door which probably led into the *Ra-Twelve's* engine section, and then four cabins, each of which had been used by two men. The cabins were in considerable disorder, but from what one could tell in a brief look-around, each of the occupants had found time to pack up about what you would expect a man to take along when he was planning on a lifeboat trip. So whatever had happened probably hadn't been entirely unexpected.

The mess-room, all tidied up, was next; two locked doors were at the back of it, and also an open entrance to the kitchen and food storage. They glanced around at everything, briefly, and went on to the control-room.

It was considerably bigger than the one on the *Asteroid* and luxuriously equipped. The pilot's section was in a transparently walled little office by itself. The instruments showed both Dardrean and Empire markings and instructions. Channok switched the dead drives off first and then reached out, quite automatically, for the spot above the control desk where a light button ought to be—

Light instantly flooded the interior of the *Ra-Twelve*.

The intruders jumped a foot. It was as if the ship had suddenly come alive around them! Then they looked at each other and grinned.

"Automatic," Channok sighed.

"Might as well do it the easy way!" Peer admitted. She slid the Ophto Needle she'd half-drawn back into its holster.

THE *RA-TWELVE* had eighteen fully charged drive batteries still untouched. With some system of automatic power transfer working, she could have gone cruising along on her course for months to come. However, she hadn't been cruising, Channok discovered next; the speed controls were set to "Full Emergency". . . . An empty ship, racing through space till the battery she was operating on went dead—

He shook his head. And then Peer was tapping his arm.

"Look what I found! I think it's her log!"

It was a flat steel box with an illuminated tape at its front end, on which a date was printed. A line of spidery Dardrean script was engraved on a plate on the top of the box.

"*Ra-Twelve,*" Peer translated. "That's her name."

"So it's a Dardrean ship! But they're using the Empire calendar," Channok pointed ont, "which would make it an Empire crew . . . How do you work this thing? If it is her log, it might give us an idea of what's happened."

"Afterwards, Channy! I just found another door leading off the other end of the control room—"

The door opened into a second passage, parallel to the one by which they had come forward, but only half as long and very dimly lit. Filled with uneasy speculations, Channok forgot his own instructions and let Peer take the lead.

"More cabins!" her voice said, just as he became aware of the wrecked doorframe out of which the light was spilling ahead of her.

A woman had been nsing that cabin. A woman who had liked beautifnl and expensive things, judging by what was strewn about. It looked, Channok thought, as if she hadn't had time to finish her packing.

"Her spacesuit's gone, though," Peer's voice announced from the interior of a disordered closet.

Channok was inspecting the door. This was the first indication that there had been any violence connected with whatever had happened on the *Ra-Twelve*. The door had been locked from without and literally ripped open from within by a stream of incandescence played on it by a gun held probably not much more than a foot away. That woman had wanted out in an awful hurry!

Peer came over to watch him. He couldn't quite read her expression, but he had a notion she wanted to bawl.

"Let's take a quick look at the rest of it and get back to the *Asteroid,*" he suggested, somewhat disturbed himself. "We ought to talk this over."

The one remaining cabin lay just beyond the point where the passage angled back into the ship. There was light in that one, too, and the door was half open. Channok got there first and pushed it open a little farther. Then he stood frozen in the door-frame for a moment.

"What's stopping you?" Peer inquired impatiently, poking his ribs from behind.

He stepped back into the passage, pulled the door shut all the way, scooped her up and heaved her to his shoulder. His space-boots felt like iron anchors as he clunk-clunked hastily back through the passages to the derelict's lock. There was nothing definite to run from any more; but he knew now what had happened on the *Ra-Twelve,* and he felt nightmare pacing after him all the way.

He crossed to the *Asteroid's* control room lock in a jump, without bothering with his jets.

"CLOSE the outer lock!" he told Peer hoarsely, reaching up for the switch marked "Decontaminant" above him.

A fourfold spray of yellowish Killall was misting the trapped air in the lock about them an instant later.

"What was it?" Peer's voice came out of the fog.

"Antibiotic," Channok said, his scalp still crawling. "What you—what voyageurs call a lich, I think. I don't know that kind. But it got the guy in that last cabin."

The occupant of the last cabin had looked as if somebody had used a particularly vicious sort of acid gun on him, which somehow had missed damaging his clothing. To the grisly class of life-forms that produced that effect, an ordinary spacesuit offered exactly no resistance.

"A lich can't last more than an hour or so in space, Channy," Peer's voice came shakily after a pause. "It's a pretty awful way to get it, but that stuff over there must have been dead for a long time now."

"I know," said Channok. He hesitated, and then cut off the Killall spray and started the blowers to clear the lock. "I guess I just panicked for a moment. But I'm going to go over that ship with de-

contaminant before we do any more investigating! And meanwhile you'd better get in a few hours of sleep!"

"Wouldn't hurt any," Peer agreed. "How do you suppose the lich got on board?"

He could tell her that. He'd seen a heavy, steel-framed glassite container in a corner of the cabin, opened. They must have been transporting some virulent form of antibiotic; and there might have been an accident—

Five hours later, they had come to the conclusion that it had been no accident. Four hours of that time, Channok had been engaged in disinfecting the *Ra-Twelve*, even her engine sections. He'd given the one man left on board space-burial in one of the *Asteroid's* steel cargo crates. The crate hadn't been launched very far and presently hung suspended some eighty yards above the two ships, visible as a black oblong that obscured the stars behind it.

It and its contents were one of the reasons Channok was anxious to get done with the job of salvaging the *Ra-Twelve*. She was a stream-lined, beautiful ship; but after what had happened, he knew he would never be able to work up any liking for her. She seemed to be waiting sullenly and silently for a chance to deal with the two humans who had dared come on board her again.

He sealed her up presently, filled her with a fresh airmix and, having once more checked everything he could think of, let Peer come over again for a final briefing on their run to Old Nameless.

Peer wandered promptly into the cabin where the dead man had been and there discovered the wall-safe.

III

SHE CALLED HIM. HE COULDN'T imagine how he had overlooked it. Perhaps because it was so obviously *there!* It was an ordinary enough safe, from what they could see of the front of it; and there was a tiny key in its lock.

They looked at it thoughtfully.

"You didn't try to open it, did you?" Channok inquired.

"No," said Peer; "because—"

"That's what I was thinking," Channok admitted.

There had been, they had decided, at least two groups working against each other in the ship. The dead man had been in charge of the antibiotic. Perhaps the woman had been on his side, perhaps not. But the eight other men had acted together and had controlled the ship. What action or threat of theirs had caused the dead man to release his terrible weapon would be hard to discover now. But he had done it, and the eight men had abandoned the *Ra-Twelve* promptly, leaving the woman locked in her cabin . . .

It looked pretty much as if she had been the one who had switched the drives to full speed—before jumping out into space. A pretty tough, desperate lot all around, in Channok's opinion. The *Ra-Twelve's* log offered the information that they had left Dardrea three calendric days earlier, but had been of no further help in identifying crew or passengers. That most of of them were professional criminals, however, seemed a pretty safe bet—as Peer had pointed out, in voyageur terms, amateurs didn't play around with taboo-weapons like a bottled lich!

Also, amateurs—Peer and Channok, for example—could have sense enough not to blunder into a booby-trap . . .

"He'd know, of course," Channok said reflectively, "that everybody would be wondering what's hidden in that safe! And it could be anything up to and including full instructions on how to set up an artificial culture of antibiotics. Plenty of governments would pay twenty times what the *Ra-Twelve* is worth as salvage for that kind of information. But it's nothing *we* need to know."

"Not that bad," Peer agreed.

"And the guy who opens that wall-safe had better be an armaments expert! Which we're not. But now, crew-member Peer, if we want to get Santis' cargo cached on Old Nameless before I fall asleep, we ought to get started. Idle curiosity is something we can satisfy some other time."

"Two hours past your sleep-period right now!" said Peer, glancing at her wrist-watch. "Tsk, tsk! That always makes you so grouchy."

Half an hour later, they were on their way—Channok in the *Ra-Twelve,* Peer in the *Asteroid,* keeping as close to each other as two ships in flight could safely get. With the red glare of the Old Nameless sun a trifle off-center before him, Channok settled down in the most comfortable pilot-seat he'd ever found on any ship and decided he could relax a trifle. Peer was obviously having a wonderful time doing her first solo-piloting job on a ship of the *Asteroid's* size; and since she'd run and landed the *Asteroid* any number of times under his supervision, he wasn't worried about her ability to handle it. However, he continued to check in on her over the communicators every five minutes or so, and grinned at the brisk, spacemanlike replies he got in return. Crew-member Peer was on her best behavior right now!

By and by, then—he couldn't have said just when it started—Channok began to realize that some very odd things were happening around him—

IT APPEARED that the Thing he had put out for burial in a space-crate hadn't like the idea of being left alone. So it was following him.

Channok decided uneasily that it might be best to ignore it. But it kept coming closer and closer until, finally, the crate was floating just outside the *Ra-Twelve's* control room port, spinning slowly like a running-down top.

The crate stayed shut, but he knew the Thing inside it was watching him.

"That's my ship," the Thing remarked presently.

Channok ignored it.

"And you're all alone," said the Thing.

"No, I'm not!" said Channok. "Peer's with me."

"Peer's gone back to Santis," said the Thing. "You're all alone! Except," it added, "for me."

"Well, good-by!" Channok said firmly. There was no point in getting too chummy with it. He punched the *Ra-Twelve's* drives down as far as they would go, and the crate vanished.

How that ship could travel! Nothing could hope to keep up with him now—except, perhaps, that round, red glare of light just behind the *Ra-Twelve.*

That was actually overtaking him, and fast. It was coming up like a cosmic police-ship, with a huge, hollow noise rushing before it. Channok listened apprehensively. Suddenly, there were words:

"WHOO-WHOOO!" it howled. *"This is the Space Ghost!"*

He shot up out of his chair like a jabbed cat, knocking it over, and glared around.

The *Ra-Twelve's* control room lay brightly lit and silent behind him.

"Ha-ha!" Peer's chuckle came from the communicator. "That woke you up, I bet! Was that you that fell over?"

"Aw-awk!" breathed Channok. Articulation came back to him. "All right, crew-member Peer! Just wait till we get to Old Nameless! I'll fix you good!"

"Shall I tell you the story now about the Horror Ship from Mizar?" Peer inquired intrepidly.

"Go right ahead," Channok challenged, righting his chair and settling back into it. "You can't scare me with that sort of stuff!" He began checking their position.

He must have been asleep for quite a while! The Nameless System was less than two hours ahead now. He switched on the front screen; and the sun swam up like a big, glowing coal before him. He began checking for the seventh planet.

"Well," he reminded the communicator grimly, "you were going to tell me a story."

The communicator remained silent a moment.

"I don't think I will, anyway," Peer said then, rather quietly.

"Why not?" Channok inquired, getting his screen-viewer disentangled from a meteor-belt in the Nameless System.

"I made that Space Ghost too good!" whispered Peer. "I'm getting scared myself now."

"Aha!" said Channok. "See what behaving like that will get you?" He got Old Nameless VII into the viewer.

The communicator remained still. He looked over at it.

"Of course, there's really nothing to be scared of!" he added reassuringly.

"How do you know?" quavered Peer.

"I'm all alone."

"Nonsense!" Channok said heartily. "I can see the *Asteroid* right over there on the screen! You can see me, can't you?"

"Sure," said Peer. "That's a long way off, though. You couldn't do anything!"

"It's not safe for two ships to travel much closer together," Channok reminded her. "We're only two hours from Old Nameless right now—I'm already focussed on it."

"I've been focussed on it for an hour," said Peer. "While you were snoring," she added. "Two hours is an awful long time!"

"Tell you what," suggested Channok. "I'll race you to it. The *Ra-Twelve's* a mighty fast boat—" He checked himself. He'd only dreamed that, after all.

"Let's go!" Peer said briefly.

HE LET PEER STAY just ahead of him all the way in, though the streamlined derelict probably could have flown rings around the *Asteroid,* at that. Just an hour later, they went around Old Nameless VII twice, braking down, and then coasted into its atmosphere on their secondary drives.

"That's the place," Peer's voice said suddenly. "I can see the old Mound in the plain! In the evening strip, Channy—that straight-up cliff!"

He set the *Ra-Twelve* down first, at the base of a mountain that reared up almost vertically for eighteen thousand feet or so out of a flat, dimly-lit stretch of rocky desert land.

The *Asteroid* came down in a very neat landing, two hundred yards away. He got there on the run, just as the front lock opened. Peer came tumbling out of it into his arms and hung on fiercely, while her skipper hugged her.

"Let that scare be a lesson to you!" he remarked when he set her down.

"It certainly will," said Peer, still clutching his arm as they started over to the *Ra-Twelve.* "That old Space Ghost had me going!"

"Me, too," he confessed; "just for a moment, anyway! Well, let's get busy."

They went over the *Ra-Twelve* again from bow to stern, to make sure there was nothing they would want to take along immediately, and found there wasn't. They gave the unopened wall-safe a last calculating regard, and decided once more that they'd better not. Then they shut off everything, closed the front lock behind them and safetied it with the dock bolts.

The plain was darkening when they came out, but the top of the mountain still glowed with red light. They climbed into the *Asteroid,* and Channok closed the lock. He started for the control desk then; but Peer beat him to it and anchored herself into the seat of command with hands, knees and feet. It became apparent almost at once that he couldn't get her out of it without running the risk of pulling off her head.

"Now look here, crew-member Peer," he said persuasively, "you know good and well that if these top-heavy cargo crates have one weakness, it's the take-off!"

"It could be the pilot, too," Peer said meaningly. "I've been studying the manual, and I've watched you do it. It's my turn now."

He considered her thoughtfully.

"Suppose you die of old age, all of a sudden?" argued Peer. "Wouldn't want me to sit here alone without knowing even how to take her off, would you?"

That did it.

"Go ahead," said Channok with dignity, taking a position back of the chair. "Go right ahead! This decrepit old man of twenty-eight is going to stand right here and laugh himself sick!"

"You'll be sick, all right," promised Peer. "But it won't be from laughing! I'll read that chapter out of the manual to you sometime."

She *had* studied it, too, he decided. She sat perched forward on the edge of the chair, alert and cocky, and went through the starting operations without hitch or hesitation. The *Asteroid* rumbled beneath them, briefly building up power . . .

Channok braced himself—

IV

FOR THE NEXT few seconds, the question seemed to be whether they'd pile into the plain or the mountain first; and, for another improbable moment, they

were distinctly skidding along upside down. Then Peer got them straightened out, and they soared up rapidly into the night sky above Old Nameless.

Channok's hair settled slowly back into place.

Peer looked around at him, puzzled and rather pale.

"That's not the way it said in the manual!" she stated.

Channok whooped. Then he sat down on the floor, bent over and yelled.

When he got around to wiping the tears from his eyes, Peer was looking down at him disgustedly from the control chair.

"It wasn't the way it said in the manual!" she repeated firmly. "We're going to have to have this old crate overhauled before she'll be safe to fly—and if you weren't my husband, I'd really let you have it now!"

He stood up, muttering some sort of apology.

"I've done some just as bad!" he assured her.

"Hum!" said Peer coldly, studying Old Nameless in the screen below them. It seemed safe to pat her on the head then, but he kept his hand well out of biting range.

"We'd better get back to that mountain and bury the *Ra-Twelve* before it gets too dark to find the spot," he suggested.

"It's still just in sight," said Peer. "You get the guns ready, and I'll run us past it slowly."

Spaceships being what they were, there wasn't much ceremony about caching the *Ra-Twelve*. Channok got the bow-turret out; and as Peer ran the *Asteroid* slowly along the mountainside a few hundred feet above the *Ra-Twelve*, he cut a jagged line into the rock with the gun's twin beams. A few dozen tons of rock came thundering down on the *Ra-Twelve*.

They came back from the other side, a little higher up, and he loosened it some more. This time, it looked as if a sizable section of the mountain were descending; and when the dust had settled the *Ra-Twelve* was fifty feet under a sloping pile of very natural-looking debris. To get her out again, they'd only have to cut a path down to her lock and start her drives. She'd come out of the stuff then, like a trout breaking water . . .

Satisfied, they went off and got the *Asteroid* on an orbit around Old Nameless, not too far out. Peer had assured Channok that Santis' investigations had proved the planet safe for human beings, so it probably was. But he knew he'd feel more comfortable if they put in their sleep-periods outside its atmosphere. Bathed in the dismal light of its giant sun, Old Nameless looked like a desolate backyard of Hell. It was rocky, sandy, apparently waterless and lifeless and splotched with pale stretches of dry salt seas. Incongruously delicate auroras went crawling about its poles, like lopsided haloes circling a squat, brooding demon. It wasn't, Channok decided, the kind of planet he would have stopped at of his own accord, for any purpose.

THE CLIFF against which they had buried the *Ra-Twelve* was the loftiest section of an almost unbroken chain of mountains, surrounding the roughly circular hundred-mile plain, which was littered with beds of boulders and sand-hills, like a moon crater. What Peer had referred to as the "Mound" lay approximately at the center of the plain. It turned out, next morning, to be a heavily weathered, dome-shaped structure half a mile high and five miles across, which gave the impression that all but the top tenth of a giant's skull had been buried in the sand, dented here and there with massive hammers, and sprinkled thickly with rock dust. It was obviously an artifact—constructed with hundred-foot bricks! As the *Asteroid* drifted down closer to it, Channok became interested.

"Who built it?" he asked.

Peer shrugged. She didn't know. "Santis spent a few hours jetting around the edges of it once," she said. "But he wouldn't tell us much; and, afterwards, he wouldn't let us get nearer than a mile to it. He didn't go back himself, either—said it was dangerous to get too close!"

It didn't look dangerous. But fifty thousand years ago, it might have been a fortress of some sort.

"You oughtn't to be flying so low over

it, even!" Peer said warningly. "Right in the middle on top is where it's the most dangerous, Santis said!"

Channok didn't argue the matter—they had to get Santis' special cargo cached and off their hands first, anyway. He lifted the *Asteroid* a mile or so and then brought her down a couple of miles beyond the Mound, at the point Peer had designated.

They got out of the ship and gazed about the broken, rocky plain. The red light of the Nameless Sun was spilling across it in what passed for morning on this world. In it, the black mountain chains rearing about the horizon and the craggy waves of flat land had the general effect of a bomb-shattered and slowly burning city. Far off to their left, he could see the upper half of the towering precipice which marked the *Ra-Twelve's* resting-place.

"How long a time did you say you spent here?" he asked.

Peer reflected. "About two Terra-months, I guess. I'm not sure, though. That was a long time ago. My youngest brother Dobby wasn't born yet."

He shook his head. "What a spot for a nice family picnic!"

"It wasn't a picnic," Peer said. "But my kid brother Wilf and I had a lot of fun anyway, just running around and teasing the ghouls. I guess you don't notice so much what a place looks like when you're little."

"Teasing the what?"

"Ghouls," said Peer carelessly.

He looked at her suspiciously; but she seemed to be studying the nearby terrain for a good spot to start digging.

"And what were Santis and your mother doing?" he inquired.

"They were looking for some sort of mineral deposit on Old Nameless; I forget just what. How about that spot—just under that little overhang? It looks like good, solid top-rock."

CHANNOK agreed it was just the place. He'd got a drilling attachment mounted to the *Asteroid's* small all-purpose tractor; and now he went back and ran the machine down the ramp from the storage lock. He ordered Peer, who wanted to help, up a rock about twenty feet overhead, where she perched looking like an indignant elf, out of reach of any stray puffs of the drill-blast. Then he started running a slanting, narrow tunnel down under the overhang.

Half an hour later, when he backed the tractor out of the tunnel, pushing a pile of cooking slag behind him, he saw her standing up on the rock with a small stun-gun in her hand. She beckoned to him.

Channok pulled off his breather-mask, shut off the tractor, and jumped from the saddle.

"What is it?" he called anxiously, trotting towards her, while the machine's clacking and roaring subsided.

"Some of those ghouls!" Peer called back. "Climb up here and I'll show you." She didn't seem worried.

"They've ducked behind those rocks now," she said as he clambered up beside her; "but they won't stay there long. They're curious, and I think some of them remember the time we were here before."

"Are they dangerous?" he inquired, patting his holstered set of heavy-duty Reaper guns.

"No," said Peer. "They look sort of awful, but you mustn't shoot them! If they get inside of thirty feet I'll hit them in the stomach with a stunner. They grunt then and run. Santis said that was the right way to teach them not to get too nosey."

They waited a moment in silence, scanning the rocks.

Then Channok started violently.

"Holy !!**?** Satellites!" he swore, his hair bristling.

A big, dead-white shape had popped up springily on a rock about fifty feet away, stared at him for an instant out of eyes like grey glass-platters, and popped down out of sight again. Awful was right!

"Aha!" crew-member Peer gloated, grinning. "You shouldn't have said that! Tonight you've got to let me soap out your mouth!"

A light dawned gradually.

"You did it on purpose!" he accused her. "You knew I'd say something like that the first time I saw one!"

Peer didn't deny it.

"It's the soap for you, just the same!"

she shrugged. "People ought to have some self-control—that's what you said! Look, there' another one now—no, two!"

V

WHEN HE CAME UP FOR lunch, he found about fifty ghouls collected around the area. By that time he had dug the cache, steel-lined it, disinfected it and installed preservatives, a humidifier and a dowser plate. Loading it up would take most of the rest of the day.

He avoided looking at the local population as much as he could while he ate. However, the occasional glimpses he got suggested that the Nameless System had made a half-hearted and badly botched attempt at developing its own type of humanoid inhabitant. They had extremely capable looking jaws, at any rate, and their wide, lipless mouths were wreathed in perpetual idiot grins. The most completely disagreeable parts of them, Channok decided, were the enormous, red-nailed hands and feet. Like fat, white gargoyles, they sat perched around the tops of the rocks in a wide circle and just stared.

"Sloppy-looking things," he remarked, noticing Peer's observant eyes on him. "But at least they're not trying to strike up a conversation!"

"They never say anything until you hit them in the stomach with a stunner," she informed him. "Then they just grunt and run."

"Sure they mightn't get mean about that? The smallest of this lot looks plenty big enough to take us both apart."

Peer laughed. "All of them together wouldn't try it! They're real yellow. Wilf got mad at a couple of 'em once and ran 'em halfway over to the Mound before mother caught up with him and stopped him. Wilf had his blood up, that time!"

"Maybe the ghouls built the Mound," Channok suggested. "Their great-great-ancestors, anyway."

"They won't go near it now," Peer said, following his gaze. "They're scared of that, too!"

They studied the rugged, ungainly slopes of the huge artifact for a moment. There was something fascinating about it, Channok thought. Perhaps just its size.

"Santis said the plain was the bottom of a sea a while ago," Peer offered. "So it could have been some sort of sea-things that built it."

"Any entrances into it?" he asked casually.

"Just one, right at the top."

"You know," he said, "I think I'd like to go over and have a look at that thing before we leave."

"No!" said Peer, alarmed. "You'd better not. Santis said it was dangerous—and there *is* something there! We saw a light one night."

"What kind of a light?"

"Like someone walking around the top of it, near that entrance, with a big lamp in his hand," Peer remembered. "Like he might have been looking for something."

"Sounds a bit like your old friend, the Space Ghost," Channok murmured suspiciously.

"No," Peer grinned. "This was a *real* light—and we took off the next evening. Santis said it might be as well if we moved somewhere else for a while."

Channok considered a moment. "Look," he said finally, "we can do it like this. I'll jet myself over there and stroll around it a bit in daylight; and if you're worried, you could hang overhead in the *Asteroid* with a couple of turrets out. Just in case someone gets tough."

"I could, maybe," said Peer, in a tight voice, "but I'm not going to. If you're going to go walking around there, after all Santis said, I'm going to be walking right behind you!"

"Oh, no, you're not," Channok said.

"Oh, yes, I am!" said Peer. "You can't make me stay here!"

He looked at her in surprise. Her eyes were angry, but her lower lip quivered.

"Hey," he said, startled. "Maybe I'm being a pig!"

"You sure are!" Peer said, relieved. The lip stopped quivering. "You're not going over there, then?"

"Not if you feel that way about it," Channok said. He paused. "I guess," he admitted awkwardly, "I just didn't like the idea of Santis flitting around space,

Holy Aynstyn knows where, and still putting in his two millicredits worth every so often, through crew-member Peer!"

Peer blew her nose and considered in turn. "Just the same," she concluded, "when Santis says something like that, it's a lot better if people do it. Is 'Holy Aynstyn knows where' a swear-word?"

"No," said Channok. "Not exactly."

HE'D FINISHED his lunch and was just going to suggest they run the tractor out of the cache and back the few hundred yards to the *Asteroid* for the first load of Santis' cargo, when he noticed that all the ghouls had vanished.

He called Peer's attention to the fact.

"Uh-huh," she said in an absent-minded tone. "They do that sometimes . . ."

Channok looked at her. She was staring at a high boulder a short distance away, with a queer, intent expression, as if she were deep in thought about something. He hoped she wasn't still brooding about their little argument—

Then she glanced at him, gave him a sudden grin, swung herself around and slid nimbly off the rock.

"Come on down quick!" she said. "I want to show you something before you get back to work. A ghoul-burrow!"

"A ghoul-burrow?" Channok repeated unenthusiastically.

"Yes, sure!" said Peer impatiently. "They're cute! They're all lined with glass or something." She spread her arms wide. "Jump, and I'll catch you!"

Channok laughed, flopped over on his stomach with his legs over the edge of the rock, and slid down in a fair imitation of Peer's nonchalant style of descent, spraining his ankle only a little. Well, he hadn't grown up skipping from craggy moon to asteroid to heavy-planet to whatnot like she had . . .

They threaded their way about the rocks to the spot she had been studying. She explained that he'd have to climb into the burrow to get a good idea of what it was like.

"Well, look now, Peer!" Channok protested, staring into the big, round hole that slanted downwards under a big boulder—it did seem to be lined with black glass or some similar stuff. "That cave's got 'No Trespassing' written all over it. Supposing I slide down a half a mile and land in a mess of ghouls!"

"No, you won't," Peer said hurriedly. "It goes level right away, and they're never more than thirty feet long. And the ghoul's out—there's never more than one to a burrow; and I saw this one pop out and run off just before we started here! You're not scared, are you? Wilf and I crawled in and out of hundreds of them!"

"Well, just for a moment then," said Channok resignedly.

HE GOT DOWN on hands and knees and crept into the tunnel. After about six feet, he stopped and found he could turn around without too much trouble. "Peer?" he called back.

"Yes?" said Peer.

"How can I see anything here," Channok demanded peevishly, "when it's all dark?"

"Well, you're in far enough now," said Peer, who had sat down before the entrance of the tunnel and was looking in after him. "And now I've got to ask you to do something! You know how I always promptly carry out any orders you give me, like getting in my full sleep-period and all?" she added anxiously.

"No, you do not!" Channok stated flatly, resting on his elbows. "Half the time I practically have to drag you to the cabin. Anyway, what's that got to do with—"

"It's like this," Peer said desperately. She glanced up for a moment, as if she had caught sight of something in the dim red sky overhead. "You've got to stay in there a while, Channy!"

"Eh?" said Channok.

"When those ghouls pop out of sight in daytime like that, it's because there's a ship or something coming."

"Peer, are you crazy? A ship! Who—I'm coming right out!"

"Stay there, Channy! It's hanging over the *Asteroid* right now. A big lifeboat with its guns out—it must be those men from the *Ra-Twelve!* They must have had a tracer of some sort on her!"

"Then get in here quick, Peer!" Channok choked, hauling out one of the Reap-

ers. "You know good and well that bunch would kill a woman as soon as a man!"

"They've already seen me—I wanted them to," Peer informed him. She was talking out of the side of her mouth, looking straight ahead of her, away from the cave. "I'm not going to be a woman. I'm going to be a dumb little girl, ordinary size. I can pull that one off any time!"

"But—"

"They'll want to ask questions. I think I can get them to send that lifeboat away. We can't fight that, Channy; it's a regular armed launch! Santis says you can always get the other side to split its forces, if you're smart about it."

"But how—"

"And then, when I yell 'Here we go!' then you pop out. That'll be the right moment—" She stood up suddenly. "We can't talk any more! They're getting close—" She vanished with that from before the mouth of the burrow.

"Hold on there!" a voice yelled in the distance a few seconds later, as Channok came crawling clumsily up the glassy floor of the tunnel, hampered by the Reaper he still clutched in one hand. It seemed to come from up in the air, and it was using the Empire's universal dialect.

Peer's footsteps stopped abruptly.

"Who you people?" her voice screeched in shrill alarm. "You cops? I ain't done nothing!"

VI

"AND JUST LOOK AT THOSE guns she's carrying!" the deeper of the two strange voices commented. "The real stuff, too— a stunner and an Ophto Needle! Better get them from her. If it isn't a baby Flauval!"

"I didn't shoot nobody lately!" Peer said, trembly-voiced.

"No, and you ain't going to shoot nobody either!" the other strange voice mimicked her. That one was high-pitched and thin, with a pronounced nasal twang to it. "Chief, if there're kids with them, it's just a bunch of space-rats that happened along. It couldn't be Flauval!"

"I'd say 'it couldn't be Flauval',if we'd found her dead in her cabin," the deep voice said irritably. "But that door was burned out from inside—and *somebody* ditched the *Ra-Twelve* on this clod!" It sounded as if the discovery of Peer had interrupted an argument between them.

"I still can't see how she got out," Nasal-voice Ezeff said sullenly. "She must have been sleeping in her spacesuit. We were out of the ship thirty seconds after I slap-welded that lock across her door! She must have felt the boat leaving and started burning her way out the same instant—"

"It doesn't matter how she did it," said the deep voice. Apparently, it belonged to someone with authority. "If Flauval could think and move fast enough to switch the drives to Full Emergency and still get alive out of a ship full of the Yomm, she could cheat space, too! She always did have the luck of the devil. If we'd had just that minute to spare before leaving, to make sure—"

It paused a moment and resumed gloomily: "That stubborn old maniac of a Koyle —'I'm the Duke's man, sir!' Committing suicide—like *that*—so no one else would get control of the Yomm! If we hadn't managed to start the launch's locators in time . . . Well, I hope I'll never have to sweat out another four days like the last. And now we still have to find whoever got Koyle's records!"

"Flauval ain't here," Peer offered at that point, brightly.

There was a pause. It seemed that the two newcomers must have almost forgotten their prisoner for a moment.

"WHAT WAS THAT you said, kid?" Nasal-voice inquired carefully.

"Those space-rats are all half crazy," the deep voice said contemptuously. "She doesn't know what we're talking about."

"Sure I know!" Peer said indignantly. "You was talking about Flauval. It's Wilf that's the crazy one—I ain't! And she ain't here. Flauval."

"She ain't, eh?" Nasal-voice said, with speculative alertness.

"No, sir," Peer said, timid again. "She's went with the rest of'm."

Both voices swore together in startled shock.

"Where are they?" the deep voice demanded. "Hiding on the ship?"

"No, sir," quavered Peer. "It's just me on the ship, till they come back."

"You mean," the deep voice said, with strained patience, "you're supposed to be on the ship?"

"Yes, sir," said Peer. She added in a guilty mutter, "Sleepin' . . ."

"Where did the others go?" Nasal-voice inquired sharply.

"But I ain't tired," said Peer. "Well, with the boxes and stuff! What Flauval wants buried."

There was another duet of exclamations which Channok, at almost any other time, would have considered highly unsuitable for Peer's ears. Right now, it escaped his attention.

"She's got Koyle's records!" stated the deep voice then.

"What's in those boxes?" Nasal-voice snapped.

"D-d-don't shake me!" wept Peer. "Papers and stuff—I don't know. They don't never tell me nothing," she wailed, "because I'm just a little girl!"

"Yes, you're just a little girl," said Nasal-voice, exasperated. "You're not going to get much bigger either."

"Cut that," said the deep voice. "No sense scaring the kid."

"Well, you're not figuring on taking them back, are you?" Nasal-voice inquired.

"No. Just Flauval. The colonel will be glad to chat with Flauval a bit, now that she's turned up alive again. Koyle may have told her plenty before we soured him on her. But there's no point in making the rest of them desperate. It's easier when they surrender."

There was a short pause. Then the deep voice addressed Peer with a sort of amiable gruffness:

"So they all went off to bury the boxes, but you don't know where they went—is that it, little girl?"

"Oh, sure!" Peer said, anxious to please. "Yes, sir! I know that!"

"WHERE?" said both voices together, chorusing for the third time.

"It's that big Mound over there," Peer said; and Channok started nervously. "It's got a big door on top. No," she added, "I guess you can't see from down here—and you can't see from the ship. That's why I came out. To watch for'm. But you can see it plain from the top of the rocks."

"That would be the old reservoir or whatever it was we passed back there," said the deep voice.

"That's right," said Peer. "That's just what Flauval called it at lunch! The word you said. There was water there oncet, she said. They flew the boxes over with jets, but they'll be back before it's dark, they said."

There was a brief silence.

"Scares me when it's dark, it does!" grumbled the idiot-child.

"Well, that ties it up!" the deep voice said, satisfied. "It's the exact kind of stunt Flauval would try. But she's outsmarted herself, this time!"

"HOW DO YOU figure on handling it?" Nasal-voice inquired.

"Get up on one of those rocks with the kid where you can watch both that 'mound' and the lock of their ship. Yes, I know it's more trouble that way—but don't, ah, do anything conclusive about the—uh—aforementioned, before we've corralled the rest! Much more useful while capable of inhaling. Hostage possibilities. Inducement to surrender!"

"Uh-huh," Nasal-voice said comprehendingly.

"Yes, sir!" added Peer.

There was another short pause.

"Might as well skip the circumlocutions," the deep voice continued. "Barely human! I'll send a couple of men through the ship and, if it's empty, I'll leave one of them in the forward lock where you can see him. That's just in case anyone slips past us and comes back. The rest of us will go over to the reservoir in the launch. If the entrance is where she says it is, we've got them bottled. If it looks right, we'll go in."

"That'll be only four of you," said Nasal-voice. "No; three—you're keeping one at the launch-guns, aren't you?"

"Yes, of course. Hey, little girl—how many are with Flauval?"

"Of us, you mean?" Peer asked.

"Of what else?" snarled Nasal-voice.

"Now don't get her so scared she can't talk!" the deep voice reproved. "That's right, little girl—how many of you?"

"Well, there's me," sniffled Peer, "and my old man, and my big brother Dobby. And then there's Wilf—that's all. But I don't like Wilf!"

"I don't like Wilf either!" agreed Nasal-voice. "Four against three, chief! It might be safer to bring over the two from the *Ra-Twelve* first—no point in searching her anyway, now that we know where the records are!"

"No," said the deep voice. "Flauval could just happen to decide to come out in the few minutes we're gone. It's sewed up too neatly right now. We'll have the heavy guns from the launch and we'll give them a chance to surrender. Flauval's too intelligent to pass that up—she never stops hoping! The chances are there won't be any shooting, till afterwards."

"Any friends of hers are likely to be tough," Nasal-voice warned.

"Very tough," said his chief. "Like the kid there! You worry at the wrong times, my boy. A parcel of space-rats that happened along." He swore again. "That woman's unbelievable luck! Well, take care of yourself, Ezeff. I'm off. Keep your eyes open both ways! Just in case—"

VII

THERE WAS SILENCE FOR A moment. Then footsteps came crunching over the rocks towards the ghoul-burrow, and Channok got set. But the footsteps halted a few yards away.

"That's the one I was sitting on," Peer volunteered. "Nice, easy one to climb!"

"Yeah, I never saw a nicer looking rock," Nasal-voice said sourly. "We've got to climb it, too! I'm not trying any point-landings with jets. Get on up there then, before I boot you up!"

There were sounds of scrambling.

"Don't you move now!" Peer said suddenly.

"What are you talking about?" demanded Nasal-voice.

"Durn rock come loose!" muttered Peer. "Near flung me off!"

But Channok, meanwhile, had got the idea and settled back. It was not yet the Right Moment . . .

There were more scrambling sounds and some breathless swearing from Ezeff, who obviously had not spent his formative years in asteroid-hopping either. But at last all become quiet.

"And here we are!" Peer's voice floated down clearly. A small chunk of rock dropped right in front of the burrow's entrance, like a punctuation mark.

"Sit still, blast you!" said Nasal-voice, badly out of breath.

A large, dim shadow swept silently over the ground before the ghoul's burrow just then. That would be the launch, going towards the Mound. A prolonged silence overhead confirmed the impression.

"They want to give Flauval a surprise?" Peer inquired meekly at last.

Rather startlingly, Nasal-voice laughed.

"They sure do!" he agreed. "That's a good one! Yes, sir, they sure do!"

"Flauval's nice, don't you think?" continued Peer conversationally, picking up courage.

"Depends a lot on how you look at it," Nasal-voice said dreamily. "She's a real pretty thing anyhow, that Flauval! Luck of the devil she's had, too. But it's got to run out sometime."

There was another silence. Then Peer remarked:

"Boy, he set that launch down nice! Right quick spang on top of the—what the big guy said it was. On the Mound."

"We've got a good pilot," Nasal-voice agreed. "Flauval's going to get her surprise in just a minute now!"

"And there they come out of the launch," continued Peer. "One, two, three, four. All four of them. Marching right down into the Mound!"

"You've got sharp eyes," Nasal-voice acknowledged. "But that's funny!" he continued worriedly. "One of them was to stay with the guns."

"And now look at the launch!" cried Peer in a high, bright voice. "Getting *pulled* right into the Mound!"

Nasal-voice was making loud, choking sounds.

"What *was* that?" he screamed then. "What's happened? What's that over there?"

"Let go my arm!" cried Peer. "Don't pull it—you're pushing me off! *Here we go!*"

A SMALL AVALANCHE of weathered rock came down before the burrow's mouth as Channok shot out through it into the open. He looked up. In what looked like an inextricable tangle of arms and legs, Peer and Nasal-voice were sliding and scuffling down the steep side of the rock together. Nasal-voice was trying to hang on to the rock, but Peer was hanging on to him and jerking like a hooked fish whenever he got a momentary hold.

She looked down and saw Channok, put her boots into the small of Nasal-voice's back, pushed off and landed two yards from Channok on hands and feet. He flattened himself back against the boulder, while Nasal-voice skidded down the rest of the way unaided, wisely refraining from triggering his jets. In the position he was in, they simply would have accelerated his descent to a fatal degree.

He arrived more or less on his feet. Peer bounced up and down before him, her finger pointed, like a small lunatic.

"Surprise!" she screamed. "Surprise! Like Flauval got! When you locked her in her cabin and ran off with the launch, so she'd have to jump out into space!"

"That's right, kid," Nasal-voice panted softly, fumbling for his gun without taking his eyes off her. He looked somewhat like a white-faced lunatic himself just then. "Don't get scared, kid! Don't run off! I won't shoot."

He pulled the gun out suddenly.

But Channok had taken two soft steps forward by then, and he had only to swing. The Reaper was clubbed in his right hand, and he brought the butt end down on the top of Nasal-voice Ezeff's skull-tight flying cap as if he were trying to ram a stake through the surface rock of Old Nameless.

"WHAT happened over there on the Mound?" he inquired in a voice that kept wanting to quaver. He was hurriedly pulling on Nasal-voice's flight suit.

"Here's his goggles," said Peer, also shakily. "Tell you tonight about the Mound. But Santis was right!"

"That's what it sounded like," Channok admitted. He slipped on the goggles. "Do I look like this Ezeff now?"

"Not very much," Peer said doubtfully. "You still got that nose and that jaw. Better hold me close up to your face! I'll put on a good act."

"All right. As soon as I set you down in the lock, jump past the guard and yell, or something. If he looks after you, we mightn't have to kill this one." He held out his arms. "Hop up! We'd better get started before those last two on the *Ra-Twelve* decide to come over."

Peer hopped up. Channok wrapped his right arm carefully around her. They looked at each other thoughtfully for a moment.

"All set?" he asked.

"Sure," said crew-member Peer. She smiled faintly.

He triggered the jets with his left hand, and they shot upwards. Peer drew a deep breath.

"Quit bossing me around all the time, you big lug!" she yelled suddenly. She reached up for that nose and gave it a good yank.

"All right," Channok muttered, startled. "You don't have to be so realistic! He can't even see us yet!"

"Just because you're bigger'n me!" shrieked Peer as they soared over the top of the rocks into view of the *Asteroid's* lock. She hooked a smart right to Channok's left ear.

"Cut that out now, Peer!" he ordered futilely.

He was lightly battered all around by the time they reached the *Asteroid's* lock, though the act did get them in safely. But then—whether it was the nose or the jaw—the instant he dropped Peer to her feet, the guard stopped laughing and brought a gun out and up faster than Channok ever had seen a man produce one before. However, the Reaper had been ready in his hand all the time; so, with a safe fraction of a second to spare, it

talked first—

The glare of the discharge seemed about fifty times brighter than normal.

"Hit the floor, Channy!" he heard Peer's shout.

He hit it without thought, dropping over the dead guard's legs . . .

Sound rammed at him enormously, roared on and began banging itself about and away among distant mountains. The *Asteroid's* floor had surged up ponderously, settled back, quivered a bit and become stable again.

"An earthquake," Channok muttered, sitting up dazedly, "was exactly all we needed right now!"

"That wasn't any earthquake!" said Peer, standing pale-faced above him. "Get up and look!"

LONG VEILS of stuff, presumably solid chunks of mountain, were drifting down the distant, towering face of the cliff at the foot of which they had buried the *Ra-Twelve*. Rising to meet them, its source concealed beyond the horizon of the plain, was the slow, grey cloud of some super-explosion.

"I guess," he said slowly, "one of those two must have got curious about Koyle's wall-safe!"

"We were pretty smart about that," nodded Peer.

"We were, for once!" Channok agreed. He was looking around for something to sit down on quietly when he caught sight of the dead guard again. He started violently.

"Almost forgot about him! I guess now I'll have to bury him, and that Ezeff, the first thing. Maybe this one is carrying something that will show who they were."

He found something almost instantly—and he was glad then that Peer was still watching the oily writhings of the cloud across the plain. It was in a flat steel case he took out of one of the dead man's pockets: the identification disk of a member of the Imperial Secret Service—

The Service!

And they would have murdered us, he thought, shocked. They were going to do it!

He turned the guard over on his back. A big muscular young man with a look of sudden purpose and confidence still fixed on his face. It was the same face as the one on the disk.

Channok put the disk back in its case and shoved the case into the dead man's pocket. He stood up, feeling rather sick. Peer turned around from the lock and regarded him reflectively for a moment.

"You know, Channy," she stated carefully, "if you can't help it, it doesn't count."

He looked back at her. "I guess not," he said—and suddenly, for a moment, he could see four men marching one after the other down into the Mound. "Of course, it doesn't count!" he told her firmly.

VIII

THEY WORKED HARD AT shifting the cargo into the cache, but the Nameless Sun was beginning to slide down behind the mountains before they were finished. And by the time Channok had rammed the tunnel full of rocks with the tractor and cemented them into a glassy plug with the drill-blast, and scattered a camouflaging mess of boulders over everything, only a foggy red glow over the mountain crests, half obscured by the lingering upper drifts of the explosion of the *Ra-Twelve,* remained of the day.

There was no moon, but the sky had come full of stars big and little over the opposite section of the plain; and so there was light enough to make out the dark hump of the Mound in the distance. Every time Channok looked in that direction, the low, sinister pile seemed to have edged a little closer; and he looked as often as his work gave him a chance to do it. Santis might have been right in stating that the Mound wasn't dangerous if you didn't get too close to it—but the instant he suspected there might be something going on over there, Channok was going to hop off the tractor, grab up Peer and get off Old Nameless at the best speed he and the *Asteroid* could produce.

However, the Mound remained quiet. With everything done, he gave Peer a last ride back to the *Asteroid* on the tractor,

ran it up the ramp into the storage section and closed the rear lock. Then they discovered they'd left their lunch containers lying among the rocks.

If he'd been alone, Channok would have left them there. But Peer looked so matter-of-fact about it that he detached the tractor's headlight and started back with her on foot. It was only a couple of hundred yards, and they found the containers without any difficulty. The Mound seemed to have moved a little closer again, but not too much. He gave it only a casual glance this time.

"Where are your friends, the ghouls?" he inquired, shining the light around the rocks as they started back. The grisly creatures had put in a few cautious appearances during the afternoon, but their nerves seemed to have suffered even more than his own from all that had happened.

"The ghouls always hit their burrows at sundown," Peer explained. "They're not like the story ones."

"What do they find to eat around here?" Channok inquired.

"Some sorts of rocks. They've got no real teeth but their mouth is like a grinder inside. Most of the rest of their insides, too, Santis said. I had a tame one I used to pitch stones at and he'd snap 'em up. But all that weren't blue he'd spit out. The blue ones went right down—you could hear them crunching for about a foot."

"What a diet!" Channok commented. Then he stopped short. "Say, Peer! If they bite like that, they could chew right into our cache!"

"They won't," said Peer. "Come on."

"How do you know?" Channok asked, following her.

"They can't bite through a good grade of steel-alloy. And they don't like its taste anyhow. Santis said so."

WELL, IT HAD BEEN Santis this and Santis that for quite a while now! Peer's father seemed to be on record with a definite opinion on just about everything. And what made him think he knew what a ghoul liked to chew on?

Perhaps Channok couldn't be blamed too much. He was dog-tired and dirty and hungry. He'd killed his first two men that day, and not in fair fight either but with an assassin's sneak thrusts, from behind and by trickery; and he'd buried them, too. He'd seen the shining ISS disclose itself in action as something very tarnished and ugly, and a salvaged ship worth a fortune go up in a cloud of writhing grey smoke...

There had been a number of other things—close shaves that had felt too close, mostly.

At any rate, Channok stated, in flat unequivocal terms, that he didn't wish to hear anything else that Santis had said. Not ever!

"You're taking the wrong attitude," Peer informed him, frowning. "Santis is a very smart man. He could teach you a lot!"

"What makes you think I want to learn anything from a space-rat?" Channok inquired, exasperated.

Peer stopped short. "That was a dirty thing to say!" she said in a low, furious voice. "I'm not talking to you any more."

She drew away till there was a space of about six feet between them and marched on briskly towards the *Asteroid*, looking straight ahead.

Channok had to hurry to keep abreast of her. He watched her in the starlight for a few moments from the corners of his eyes. He probably shouldn't have used that term—the half-pint did look good and mad!

"Tsk! Tsk!" he said, disturbed.

Peer said nothing. She walked a bit faster. Channok lengthened his stride again.

"Who's my nice little girl friend?" he inquired wheedlingly.

"Shuddup!" growled Peer.

She climbed into the *Asteroid* ahead of him and disappeared while he sealed the locks. The control room was dark, but he felt she was around somewhere. He switched on the power and the instruments. Familiar dim pools of green and pink gleamings sprang up in quick sequence like witchfire quivering over the control desk. Perhaps it wasn't an exceptionally beautiful sight, but it looked homelike to Channok. Like fires lighting up on a hearth.

"Well, let's see you handle this take-

off!" he invited the shadows around him briskly. This time there weren't any mountains nearby to worry about.

"You handle it," Peer said from behind his shoulder. "It's my turn to laugh."

She did, too, a few minutes later—loud and long! After he'd got over the first shock of narrowly missing the Mound, Channok gave a convincing imitation of a chagrined pilot and indignantly blamed the *Asteroid* . . .

HE'D GUIDED THEM halfway out of the Nameless System when she came behind the control chair in the dark, wrapped her arms in a stranglehold around his neck, and fondly bit his ear.

"Cut it out," Channok choked.

"Just the same," stated Peer, loosening her grip a trifle, "you're *not* so smart, like Santis is!"

"I'm not, eh?"

"No," said Peer. "But Santis said you would be some time. 'That Channok's going to make a real spacer!' he said. 'Just give him a chance to catch on.'"

"Well," Channok muttered, secretly flattered, "we'll hope he was right."

"And, anyway," said Peer, "I *LOVE* you just as much!"

"Well, that's something, too!" Channok admitted. He was beginning to feel very much better.

"And guess what I've got here," Peer said tenderly.

"What?"

"A nice, soapy cloth. For what you said when you saw the first ghoul. So just open that big trap right up now, Channy!"

He couldn't tell in the dark; but it tasted like she'd taken the trouble to mix something extra foul into the soap lather, too.

"And after you've stopped spitting bubbles," said crew-member Peer, who was switching on all lights to observe that part of the business, "I'll tell you what I saw on the Mound."

Channok shuddered.

"If you don't mind, Peer," he suggested soapily, "let's wait with that till we're a lightyear or two farther out!"

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Strange Adventures on Other Worlds . . .
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Nick Pappas, hired-killer from Callisto, was strictly out for Pappas—out for Number One, as they used to say. And now those fools in the vanishing spaceship thought that number was up!

The cabin whirled around them . . . the gun fell free . . .

blind play

by CHAN DAVIS

NICK PAPPAS HAD JUST crossed to the instrument panel of the *Tang Chuh-Chih*'s lifeboat when he heard a sound behind him. He turned quickly.

He had left the airlock between the lifeboat and the ship open. That had been

stupid, he realized, but it was too late to correct it now. One of the *Tang's* two other crew members was approaching down the corridor just beyond the airlock; if he saw the doors slide shut now he'd be immediately suspicious. That would leave Pappas inside the lifeboat, and before he could drain enough fuel from the ship's tanks into the lifeboat's, the other two could have the airlock cut open.

He still had a chance to hide—but before he could propel himself to the other end of the lifeboat, out of sight, Arne Birkerod appeared at the other side of the open airlock.

Birkerod smiled. Pappas stood still, gripping the pilot's seat in front of him.

"Hello, Arne," said Pappas. "I was just checking over the—"

"Good morning, Nick—or good evening, if you like. Let's go up to the control cabin and see Garcia."

For a very brief moment, Pappas considered. Although the *Tang* was in free fall, he was very conscious of the weight of the gun concealed inside his jacket. He might use it now, but the sound would bring Garcia. Better to bluff it through. The other two might not be suspicious yet, and in a pinch he had the advantage that they weren't armed. "Sure," he said, and pushed himself across to where Birkerod stood.

"After you," said Birkerod, much more politely than usual.

PAPPAS smiled uncertainly. He planted both feet against the side of the airlock opening, then jumped off. He floated down the ship's corridor to where it took a sharp bend; there he grabbed a rung of a ladder bolted to the corridor wall.

Birkerod had pushed off harder than Pappas had; he arrived at the ladder at the same time. "After you," he said again.

Pappas saw, at the end of the long corridor ahead, the open door to the control cabin. He pushed off in that direction.

Yusuf Garcia was in the ship's pilot's seat. Garcia was half Brazilian and half Malagasy. His eyes had a strong green tint which looked strange against the deep brown-black of his face. Pappas had always been a little afraid of him and the present situation didn't help that any: there was a gun in Garcia's hand.

Birkerod followed Pappas in, taking a seat facing Garcia. "What did you find, Yusuf?" he asked casually.

"Well, Arne, I haven't finished checking up on our little conjecture; the calculator over there is still working on it. But while I was waiting I looked through our friend Pappas's locker. You may already have noticed what I found." He waved the gun. "Where did you find our friend, by the way?"

Birkerod smiled. "First place I looked."

"The lifeboat?"

"Yeah."

"What was he doing?"

"Nothing. I think I know how our little conjecture's going to turn out, though." He turned to Pappas, who had followed the exchange tensely. "You know, Nick, my father was a fellow-countryman of yours back on Earth."

"Countryman?"

"That's right. He lived just north of Winnipeg. My mother was a Canadian, too. Both of them were in the second batch of colonists that left for Callisto. But it doesn't mean much to call you a Canadian any more, does it? Garcia and you and I, we're all Callistans now."

"Sure," said Pappas, wondering.

CALLISTO: A cold world. A small new world, and a cold world, and incredibly distant from the planet that had evolved its settlers.

In the thirty years since the exploration of Jupiter's satellites had begun, Callisto had had a very different history from the rest. On Ganymede, a hundred or so engineers had been working all that time on the tremendous task of raising the satellite's mean temperature to the point where an atmosphere could be provided and open-air cities and farms built in which Earthmen could live. The smaller satellites had been largely ignored. But it had been found that Callisto had large deposits of ore of such quality that, in spite of the tremendously long haul required to carry anything from there to the inner plan-

ets, it was worth while beginning mining operations. Up went the insulated, airtight domes, out came the colonists, down went the mine shafts.

It was a hard life. Crystalline rock was cut by machines at the mine-faces, and by the time other machines had brought it up the shafts to the surface-level in the domes, it had become amorphous and powdery, its crystalline structure destroyed by being heated to twenty degrees below zero Centigrade. When you repaired machinery below the surface, you wore sixty kilograms of spacesuit (Earth weight), and a failure of any item of equipment or a fumble by any member of your crew might mean sudden death. The walls of the dome shut you in from the sky, for the vacuum out there was death too; when you did get up to the observatory to see the sky, you saw Jupiter, weirdly streaked with brilliant color—if your dome was on the side of Callisto toward Jupiter. Otherwise, you looked across twenty million kilometers of vacuum to the nearest star.

It was a hard life, and no life for a lone wolf. There were no homestead farms to be settled by lonely pioneer families. Callisto was a sterile place, and to keep life going there at all men had to work together. Cooperation was a lesson Earth civilization had learned only after thousands of years of oppression and war; a lesson that had to be learned before men could cross space; and a lesson that was very difficult to forget on Callisto. At least for most people.

Rita and Cliff Belden had control of the trade between Callisto and the inner planets. It didn't start as control, though; the way it began was this: Once the colony had been well established, its operation was left completely up to the Callistans, who shipped as much of their goods to Earth as they could manage, and requisitioned as much food and supplies from Earth as they needed—which was really the best way. The inner planets could not very well take part in the planning of Callisto's activities, since there was no radio contact and the trip took over two months by freighter even when the relative positions of the planets in their orbits was most favorable. One freighter shuttled back and forth between No. 2 Dome on Callisto at one end and any of several inner-planet ports at the other. Rita and Cliff Belden were the two Callistans whose job it was to run that freighter.

The little colony was absolutely dependent on the supplies they brought. This fact was obvious to everybody, but the Beldens made a deduction from it which was unprecedented on Callisto: they could threaten to withhold the supplies and thereby force the rest of the colonists to agree to whatever they asked—provided they could make the threat stick. They made the attempt. On one of their trips back from Earth, they put the ship into an orbit around Callisto instead of landing, and announced they would not land until their henchmen on Callisto were in control.

And the henchmen did a thorough job of taking control. All the details were taken care of: They quickly seized the radio transmitters that maintained contact with Ganymede, they confiscated all the reserves of spaceship fuel they could find, they clamped down as tightly as they could on communiation between the domes; then they started keeping a close check on every tool that could be used as a weapon. There was just one place they slipped up. Their search for fuel wasn't good enough.

The people of No. 4 Dome pooled the fuel they had hidden from the Beldens; they seized from the Beldens' guards the Dome's tiny spaceship, which had been assembled on Callisto and which had never been intended to leave the Jupiter system; and they sent the ship off for Venus, with Garcia and Birkerod aboard. Venus was the only possible destination, with the planets' positions in their orbits as they were then: to reach Earth or Mars would have taken either more fuel than they had, or much more time than they could spare.

As it was, the trip took eight months.

On Venus there was no hitch. Garcia and Birkerod went to the Liaison Office in Kreingrad, as planned, and were provided with the *Tang Chuh-Chih,* with a load of

supplies—and with Nick Pappas, a former Callistan who wanted to return there. They followed the Liaison Office's suggestion and took Pappas aboard.

"WE'RE all Callistans now," Birkerod repeated. "I wonder, Nick. How did you happen to leave Callisto in the first place? Just felt like visiting good old Saskatchewan? I doubt it. Let's see—you left before that business started with the Beldens, didn't you?"

Pappas licked his lips nervously. Garcia answered for him: "Yes, about ten months before, according to what they told us on Venus."

"Yeah," Birkerod mused. "You know the Beldens, of course."

"Yes," said Pappas, "of course. I came to Earth on their freighter."

"Not *their* freighter," Garcia put in. "Callisto's freighter, which they were operating. It's only more recently that it's become *their* freighter."

Birkerod smiled and went on, "It's interesting, Mr. Pappas, that you left Callisto about the time tbe Beldens' plans must have been taking shape. I wonder why you did?"

Pappas ignored the question. A moment before, the red signal light had flashed on above the calculator set in the opposite bulkhead. The computations had been finished on Garcia and Birkerod's "little conjecture."

Garcia, who was closest to the machine, filled in the silence. "Let's find out what the calculator has to say. It may clear things up a little."

There was a row of spring-clamps set in the bulkhead next to him for holding objects stationary while the ship was in free fall. Garcia put his gun in one of these, slipped out of the "safety belt" that had held him in the pilot's seat in spite of the lack of gravity, and turned to the calculator.

Pappas sprang. Not toward Garcia—but toward the side of the cabin that would have been the ceiling if there had been an "up." He snatched his gun from his jacket.

Something crashed into Pappas, spun him around. Birkerod had jumped too, hitting him hard in midair.

THE CABIN whirled about them. He felt Birkerod's powerful grip around the hand which held the gun. Simultaneously they reached the ceiling; Pappas's head hit metal with a crack. The gun fell free. Weightless, the two of them wrestled desperately.

Suddenly Birkerod pulled loose and jumped away. Pappas found himself alone in the middle of the cabin, drifting slowly from the pilot's seat.

In the pilot's seat Garcia was again sitting calmly, his gun leveled. Birkerod had the other gun. There was silence while Pappas reached the bulkhead, pushed back to his seat, and belted himself in.

Garcia said, "Suppose I try answering some of these questions. When Arne and I left Callisto, the Beldens learned our orbit and high-tailed in to the inner planets. With plenty of fuel, they arrived before us, and got you, their agent, on the job. You got yourself included in our return trip on the *Tang*. Then you calculated an orbit for us that would run us smack into Earth at a relative velocity of thirty-odd kilometers a second!

"The next thing was to divert the fuel from the *Tang's* tanks to the lifeboat's, and take off yourself in the lifeboat. That would have left us in a collision orbit, with no fuel to pull ourselves out of it.

"Not such a good plan, Nick. You should have planned just to kill us both as soon as the *Tang* was in space; you'd have had a better chance that way. Your overeagerness to compute our orbit just didn't look natural."

"No, listen," Pappas protested feebly. "I didn't calculate a collision orbit. I—"

"Sorry," said Garcia. "That's what the machine just finished checking for us. The orbit we're on meets Earth dead center, and it wouldn't take us to Callisto even if Earth wasn't there. Arne—*what'll we do with this character?*"

Birkerod smiled. "I like the suggestion you made when we discussed it before."

"I was just joking!"

"No, I think it's the best idea." He

turned to Pappas, who flinched in spite of himself. "Look, Nick, the Beldens have no chance of winning on Callisto. No chance. Men had to learn to cooperate before they could get to the planets at all, and by this time they've learned good and thoroughly. The individual who's out for himself is an anachronism. You and the Beldens—a hundred years ago you'd have felt right at home. Then everybody was 'out for a fast buck,' as they used to say. In this century everybody works together, and darn near everybody likes it that way.

"But, Nick, the Beldens are still dangerous. They can't win; but they can hold up the development of Callisto for years, and make the Callistans plenty miserable in the process. The inner planets won't interfere. Their policy for years has been this: Callisto is so far away that it's their concern how they run things; we'll send them supplies, they'll send us minerals, and that's that.

"So the people of Callisto have got to lick the Beldens. This ship is absolutely essential, because it's the means of breaking the Beldens' monopoly. We have to get to Callisto, and when we get there we'll be in the middle of a pretty critical situation; the *Tang* will be just as essential to the Beldens as to us, for the opposite reason."

"Therefore," Garcia put in, "we can't afford to have you around."

"What are you going to do?" Pappas murmured.

"To you?" said Birkerod. "Well, we can't take you with us; we don't want to kill you if we can help it; we can't turn you loose in the lifeboat, even if we keep most of the fuel, because we may need the lifeboat on Callisto. There's one thing left.

"If it's all right with Yusuf, we're going to put you altogether, completely on your own. You're not going to be working for anybody else, not even for stinkers like the Beldens. You're going to be all by yourself, and you're going to have to do a good job of looking out for yourself. Not for anyone else, just for Nick Pappas—'Number One,' as people used to say, We're not going to give you a word of advice, either. If we did, you wouldn't be independent enough. How does it sound, Yusuf? Appropriate?"

Garcia smiled. "Sounds about right, Arne. Maybe I'm too angry at the Beldens to think straight, but it sounds like a pretty appropriate way to handle Mr. Pappas. He'll be all on his own, and if he doesn't work things out just right—he'll get the most spectacular finish any individualist could ask for!"

NICK PAPPAS hung weightless in interplanetary space.

Ten meters away floated the *Tang Chuh-Chih*. One side of it glared white in the sunlight, the other side was jet black, visible only as a shadow across the stars. It floated there motionless, very close to him, but he knew he didn't dare to try to reach it, because it was going to start accelerating any second.

The faceplate of Pappas's spacesuit fogged slightly; he moved a hand inside the suit, adjusted the humidity control. When the faceplate had cleared, he saw that the *Tang's* rockets were already firing.

The ship still floated there, within shouting distance if there had been an atmosphere; but now from its jets there extended long, perfectly straight streaks of shimmering blue-violet. It seemed to Pappas as though he was drifting slowly parallel to the ship, in the direction of the jets. He shook his head to get rid of the illusion. He was remaining perfectly still, the ship's hull was sliding past him. When the jets were abreast of him, they cut off. He watched the ship receding, rapidly now. A minute or so later there were two short blasts on the steering jets; Pappas realized they were swinging the ship around so he wouldn't be caught in the rocket blast. Then the main jets started up again.

Pappas followed the ship with his eyes as long as he could distinguish it—which wasn't long. Then, he was *alone*.

Not only were there no walls around him, there wasn't even anything under his feet. There was nothing, anywhere.

"So this was what all that talk added

up to," Pappas thought. "They simply set me out here in the middle of the vacuum to stay until the suit's food and air give out."

He thought he might as well make himself at home. He checked over the suit. It was nicely equipped. In addition to standard items, there were several things strapped onto the back of the suit on the outside which pleased him until he realized how little difference they made: There was a reel of light, strong cable with magnetic grapples which could be clamped onto it. There was a hand reaction motor the size of a Stillson wrench, and ten containers of fuel, each the size of a fountain pen. There was a large mirror, for signaling. Also for the same purpose, there was a powerful, highly directional searchlight. He checked the cells which powered it; they were low, but he knew they were charging at that moment from the sunlight falling on them. The searchlight would work. For what that was worth.

So much for his suit. Next, where was he? His position couldn't be given in latitude and longitude, because there wasn't anything for it to be latitude and longitude *on*. He was somewhere between the orbits of Venus and Earth. The direction of the Sun he could tell by glancing at the arm of his spacesuit and seeing where the sunlight fell—the Sun was behind him and to the right, and a little "downward."

As for the Earth, that would be the next brightest body in his sky. He craned his head in all directions, searching. Then he took out the hand reaction motor and gave a blast to start himself spinning, so he could search in the directions he hadn't been able to see in before. Even the short blast he used made the motor tug at his hand and started the universe whirling around him frighteningly. He turned the control on the motor down as low as it would go, then pressed the button several more times. Finally he had canceled out most of his rotation, and the Milky Way was wheeling calmly about him. He got himself oriented again and after a short time had identified Earth, which was close enough to appear as a blue-green disk.

EARTH! A thought suddenly struck him. The *Tang* had been heading straight for Earth when it had let him off; he was still going exactly in the *Tang's* former orbit. He would reach Earth! There was one more thing he should check—yes, he had a parachute. It was on the back of his spacesuit, underneath the gear he'd investigated before. Now if he could land safely he was all set! Birkerod and Garcia must not have thought of this.

One thing still bothered him: He had been headed for Earth when he was put off the *Tang*, but had anything happened since to put him off course? How about those times he'd used the reaction motor to set himself spinning? Well, the several small blasts would probably not have had any net effect on his direction of motion, and if they had there wasn't anything to be done about it. But the single strong blast at the beginning—he could remember which constellation he'd been facing at the time, where he'd held the reaction motor, and how strong a blast he'd given. That meant he could give an approximately equal blast now in the opposite direction. This he did, being careful to aim directly away from his center of gravity, so as not to start spinning again.

Now he should be back on course, he figured. Assuming, that is, that he'd ever been off. The small thrust of his reaction motor, applied for such a short time, might not be enough to make any appreciable difference as to where he ended up. He didn't bother trying to calculate it.

Nothing to do now but wait. He spent the time thinking about what he'd do when he got to Earth. It was hard to figure. He'd had a racket on Earth for the year-and-a-half after the Beldens brought him there; everyone had assumed he was doing something important to Callisto's welfare, and all he'd had to do was go through the motions. Now, he didn't know. It was probably true that the Beldens were through; with the *Tang Chuh-Chih* arriving on Callisto, the odds were against them.

He'd have to find something else, Pap-

pas decided. This whole Belden business was pretty provincial, anyway. And as for Birkerod, Garcia, and those people—! Pappas dismissed Callisto from his thoughts completely. There would have to be some angle on the inner planets.

After several hours of thought on the subject, he took stock of his situation again. The disk of Earth was a little larger, he thought, but not enough so you'd notice it. He pulled the semi-opaque visor over his faceplate and went to sleep.

HE SLEPT for ten days.

Not Earth days, however. When Pappas went to sleep the Sun was behind him. He thought he had eliminated his rotation, but actually he was tumbling head over heels, extremely slowly. Thus, for him, the Sun rose between his feet and set directly "above" him.

The eleventh of these "sunrises" woke him. He stayed awake, because as soon as he flipped his visor up and looked around him the Earth caught his eye. It was much closer. He did not know how to measure its angular diameter, so he couldn't calculate his distance from it even approximately, but it *looked* enormous.

How long had his nap lasted? The spacesuit's chronometer was running. Its minute hand indicated 37; its hour hand, 15; its day hand, 3. That would have told him how long he'd slept, if he'd read the chronometer before he went to sleep; but he hadn't. All he knew was that he'd slept much longer than he'd expected, and long enough to get painfully stiff.

In any case, he'd covered a lot of distance. As much as the *Tang* would have covered in the same time, he realized. He was approaching Earth pretty fast.

"*Too* fast," he added aloud, nervously. He'd have to decelerate before he got there or the parachute wouldn't do him any good. Now, was it time yet to start decelerating? If he directed the hand reaction motor in the wrong direction now, could it cause him to miss Earth? He guessed not: the planet looked so close, any small "sidewise" push he gave himself could hardly hurt. Once he killed his speed, Earth's gravitational field would gather him in.

Pappas took out the reaction motor. Using low power, he turned himself till he faced Earth. The planet seemed to have swelled just in the time since he'd waked up. He set the reaction motor to full power, grasped it with both hands, held it in front of his chest, and pointed it straight at Earth. Then he pressed the button and held it down.

The force of the hand jet pushed in at his midriff, made his legs and head swing forward. Well, that was okay as long as they didn't get into the exhaust. He stopped blasting a moment to get a better grip on the reaction motor, then fired continuously. Occasionally he would find he'd started himself spinning; then he'd shift the motor just a trifle to keep himself facing the planet. He kept the button firmly pressed down, and the cylinder in his hands sent a continuous jet of intense blue toward Earth. When the first fuel cartridge was exhausted, he put in the second and kept it up.

Twice he stopped for a food pellet and a little water. The rests were welcome: his arms and chest were stiff and aching. But he didn't rest long, because he was getting really scared now. He was sure he was dangerously close to his destination, and his speed hadn't been cut enough. The continents and oceans of Earth's day side were clearly visible, and grew noticeably larger as he looked at them.

He now thought of the direction he was going as *down;* he thought of himself as *falling.*

Something bothered him: America had not been in sight a while ago, but now he could see a corner of Brazil appearing at the edge of the disk of Earth. Did that mean he was passing by Earth instead of falling straight at it? No, he realized in a moment, it just meant Earth was rotating; for he could see that the sunset line, the line between night side and day side, had not changed its apparent position on the disk.

No, he was still falling. And he was *falling too fast.*

A suspicion began to form that Birkerod and Garcia *had* anticipated this. And

suddenly, terrifyingly, he thought of what Garcia's last remark might have meant!

Still, they'd said there was a way he could save himself. And the only way he could think of was to break his fall. He had a certain quantity of fuel to do it with, and he was using it. He was using it for all it was worth, no matter how much his body ached with fatigue. If those two on the *Tang* had figured this all out ahead of time, then they must have left him enough fuel to avoid being killed. Otherwise they might as well have shot him on the *Tang*. Okay, if he had enough fuel he'd use it all.

ONE AFTER ANOTHER the fuel cartridges burned out. Pappas longed for another rest, but he didn't dare take one now. He kept firing, and still the Earth kept growing larger and brighter below him. Finally, there was no more fuel.

After a short breather, Pappas took the reaction motor, detached it from the cord which bound it to his spacesuit, and flung it downward with all his strength. Then he did the same with the mirror, the searchlight, and the reel of cable. It was all he could do.

Then there was an instant when he saw where he had gone wrong. He had not had enough fuel to do what he'd tried to do. That was clear by one look at Earth's face, which still grew alarmingly fast below him; and he could probably have figured it out before. But there had been a way which *would* have given him some chance. He should have used his fuel, not in a hopeless attempt to decelerate, but in deflecting himself so he would miss Earth! He would have passed by Earth, relatively close. He'd have passed fast, but not too fast to signal with his mirror to Earth's several satellites, natural and artificial. The spaceports on those satellites kept twenty-four-hour watches for signals of distress; when they saw a faint blinking light they would send out a ship which would try to locate its source. They were good at it, too, and if he'd kept his mirror spinning they might have picked him up.

But he hadn't thought of it. It had never occurred to him that even when he was alone, as thoroughly alone as anyone can ever be, his life could depend on dozens of other people. He'd thought only of reaching safety by himself. And, seeing only the one possibility, he'd played it blindly.

There was that instant of sickening realization, then a little later came an instant when Earth ballooned out grotesquely below him, suddenly filling most of his field of vision, and he saw lakes, islands, deserts. He felt all over him an abrupt, final flash of heat, and *Nick Pappas became a meteor.*

out of the • DARK NEBULA

By MILTON L. COE

Five thousand green space-cadets, manning the mighty Albion on their shake-down cruise, heard that grim message from HQ: *"War with Xantu! Return immediately to Terra Base!"* Which posed a problem . . . for lurking in starry battleground, somewhere between Earth and the doom-ship, was half the Xantu fleet!

●

THE BULKHEADS OF THE mighty battleship rocked with the song welling from five thousand throats. As the young, eager voices swelled into the chorus of "The Spaceman's Hymn," Vice-Admiral Jack Harrigan felt a lump grow in his own throat. Captain Mike O'Brien, short, muscular and definitely Irish, joined the admiral at the balcony hatch; together they looked down upon the huge ship's auditorium.

"It's a long, long way to the Milky Way . . ." the chorus rose, fell, faded and died.

Harrigan nodded to O'Brien and the two men matched strides down the passageway.

"Something on your mind, Jack?" O'Brien asked.

"Oh, I don't know, Mike. I just got to thinking about the old days, I guess, hearing those kids singing. The Force is all glory to them; color, ceremony, power, flitting around the Galaxy like this. Cream of the crop, they are, and every last one of them fought to get in the Force. But I wonder how they'd face up to the other side of this business?"

"Combat?" O'Brien screwed up his face.

"Yeh boy. Combat like we saw, with our backs to the wall and nine-tenths of the Galaxy howling for our heart's blood. Wonder if they'd change their minds about the force—" he jerked his thumb back towards the auditorium—" if it came again?"

"Dunno." Mike shrugged. "Maybe old Fitzsimmons wondered about us the same way when we went on our shakedown cruise. We were a sad bunch, I'll admit. But we didn't pan out too bad, did we Jack?"

The two officers had reached the observation deck. The Milky Way stretched a hazy filament across the heavens. Harrigan drew a long breath, hooked his thumbs in his belt and smiled.

"No, Mike, not bad at all, if I do say so. It was rugged while we were going through it, I suppose. But things have been quiet for so long now . . . damn it, we did have fun, didn't we Mike?"

Mike grinned crookedly. "Fun is right. Remember the time Shorty Michaels caught those two Xantu ships flat-footed behind the Coal Sack?"

"Yeah. Blew 'em to Hell and back and found out later they were the two strongest ships in the Xantu fleet. If they had seen him first . . . brother, he shook for a week after they told him."

Mike roared with laughter. "Battle wagons, and Shorty with a destroyer."

A blinding blast, and four billion square miles of space flashed into daylight . .

R Hamilton

"And how about that time the gang of Zith stinkers ambushed us on Sirius V . . . Were they surprised when their water-pistols didn't kill us! They didn't know that water isn't quite as fatal to a Terran as it is to a Zith."

"Yeah," O'Brien said; "and I'll never forget the smile on Cap Martin's face as he sprayed 'em with the ship's fire hose."

"Well," the admiral said, sobering, "if you'd seen the pitiful remains in their slave camps on Sirius VII, the way Cap and I did . . ." He shook his head slowly. "We should have bounced a couple Duodec bombs off their home planet. And on Xantu too. Finished the job right."

The captain gazed down at his shoes. "We might get the chance yet. Any news lately?"

"Not much. Jnst the usual rumblings from the Dark Nebulas. But I agree with HQ that the Xantu are at the bottom of it, without a doubt. You never know when those varmints are going to start trouble. That's the reason for all this hush-up preparation; we're going to be ready at the drop of a helmet if anybody wants to rassle."

"Smart move by HQ for once," Mike said. "Never hurt to be ready for . . ."

A communications orderly saluted smartly.

"Pardon, Sir. HQ Double urgent."

Harrigan took the flimsy from the orderly and scanned it quickly. His face went slack. "Good Lord, O'Brien! Hear this: 'Dark Nebula forces simultaneously attacked Rigel patrol post and Capella II settlement 1400 hours. Personnel annihilated. Fleet headed by Xantu elements headed Sector I. Return to Base Immediately'."

"Sector I. Sol—Alpha Centauri—Sirius sector!" Mike whistled and shook his head. "They'll cut us off before we can reach Terra."

"They will if we don't get a move on," the admiral snapped, "and we can't fight with a green crew. Gotta get these kids back to Terra."

Harrigan leaped to the audio. His orders were short and sharp.

"Drive room: Joe, full speed home, boy. The bubble's busted wide open.

"Quartermaster; Wilson, prepare to issue battle suits.

"Central: Give me the system. Thanks." He cleared his throat. "All hands hear this. A state of war exists between the Solar Federation and the Dark Nebula League. We will attempt to reach Terra base before being cut off by the enemy fleet. However, just in case, we will be ready. Battle stations!"

THE NEXT FEW HOURS were hectic ones, especially for the few seasoned officers aboard the battleship *Albion*. The *Albion* was a fairly new ship. She was fast, heavily armored, and carried the latest guns, three facts which Harrigan hoped would save them from disaster. He realized that HQ had had to break radio silence to notify them of the sudden outbreak of hostilities, but he also knew that the enemy had undoubtedly intercepted the message, plotted the *Albion* course, and sent a half-dozen of their fastest ships in hot pursuit. That's the way the Dark Nebula League liked to fight: six to one. Harrigan figured that he just might be able to outrun them; but if the League ships did manage to cut them off from Terra . . . well, he hated the idea of fighting that bunch of cut-throats with a crew of green kids. Ordinarily, new spacemen were distributed among crews of seasoned men at a ratio of about one in ten. To be in top fighting condition, the *Albion* should carry four thousand regulars and four hundred greenies. There were five thousand men on board; one hundred and fifty old line officers, fifty newly commissioned officers, and forty-eight hundred Terran youngsters fresh out of ground school.

The officers had done their best to whip the crew into the semblance of a fighting unit. If a fracas did develop, they might squeeze through if the kids could follow orders. But in battle things happened almost too fast to be covered by orders. A man had to think for himself.

Harrigan found himself staring through the forward screen, wishing that three or four thousand hardened space-Marines would suddenly materialize out of thin

air. O'Brien came steaming up. He sat down beside the admiral, lit a cigarette and said "Phwooee."

"Right you are," Harrigan answered. "Things sure popped, didn't they?"

"And how. Think we ought to prowl?"

"Guess so. We're going to watch things mighty damned close till we hit base. Better check the gun-banks. And by the way, Mike, who had the controls when that order came in?"

"Young chap named McDaniels."

"And his navigator?"

"Rose. Why?"

"Have them report to me when they come off. They're to be congratulated for getting us away fast and right. If the rest of the crew picks up as fast as those two, we'll make out O.K. Let's have a look at those banks."

THE ALBION'S eight gun-banks spangled the ship from nose to tubes like stripes on a watermelon. Each bank was divided into A, B and C sections, fore, aft and center. Forty-eight men and two officers manned each section. The atomic cannon in the nose were fired only by the ship's Master gunner, a sardonic expert named Irvington.

At number six gun-bank, Harrigan and O'Brien entered section C hatch. O'Brien's mouth fell open. Along the catwalk behind the gun emplacements proper, men lounged and leaned. One slept. Several were smoking and most of them had thrown back their helmets. Of the forty-eight, three had their eyes on the finder screens.

"Attention," Harrigan roared, and fifty men jerked erect like puppets on a string. "Get your helmets up and your eyes on those screens. And keep them there until you're ordered off. This isn't a shakedown any longer; this is war!" He turned to O'Brien. "Who's in charge here?"

"Lieutenant Sanderson."

"Leave the Ensign in charge and have Sanderson report to the bridge at once." Harrigan stooped through the hatch. "And Mike, see that the word is passed along to the remaining gun-crews. Damned if I'll see a repeat of this!"

"Yes, sir," Mike answered, and turned toward the nervous lieutenant. "Report to the bridge, Mister, and prepare to be chewed."

Sanderson managed a weak "Yes, sir."

* * *

Harrigan was pacing the bridge when McDaniels and Rose came in, stood at attention and saluted crisply.

The admiral returned the salute. "Relax, gentlemen. I called you here to commend you both personally for your fast, clear thinking under the stress of emergency. Cool-headedness under strain is taken as a matter of course in the Space Forces, but in this case your actions served as an example to an inexperienced crew and are therefore doubly appreciated by the officers of this ship. Sit down."

The two men took seats and Harrigan relaxed behind his own massive desk. "I was with your father at Cadet school, McDaniels, and later at the Battle of Canopus. Where is the Commander now?"

McDaniels, short and pudgy, answered proudly. "He took command of Polaris Base I just before we left on the cruise, sir."

"Oh?"

The kid doesn't know yet, Harrigan thought. If the Force can't stem the League attack damned quick, old McDaniels and his men will be the expendibles in this scrap. But the kid sitting before him was so eager and obviously proud of his father that the admiral hadn't the heart to tell him the true score.

"Sir," Rose piped up, "are you the same officer Harrigan that Dad mentioned during the First Campaign? He was Master Navigator on the old 'Cometeer.'"

"I certainly am." Harrigan smiled broadly. "'Red' Rose was the best navigator I ever had. He could plot you half way around the Galaxy and land you in your barracks just in time for supper. How long has it been now, six years, seven?"

Rose looked at the floor. "Seven, sir. He was hunting Kalabs on Callisto when the landslide caught him."

"I'm sorry, deeply sorry."

FOOTSTEPS SOUNDED in the passageway and the lieutenant, Sanderson, came in, followed closely by O'Brien. The lieutenant tucked his cap under his elbow, smoothed back his thick hair and saluted.

Harrigan gazed at the man for a long moment.

"Lieutenant, perhaps the seriousness of our circumstances has not impressed you fully. But the *Albion*, carrying this inexperienced crew, stands in imminent danger of being overwhelmed by the League fleet, or at best, being cut off from Terran base. Therefore I think it . . . Oops!" Harrigan had knocked his water pitcher to the floor. The plastic didn't break, but water splashed. Sanderson jumped back convulsively, his face white. O'Brien motioned an orderly to mop up the mess, and the admiral went on. "You are a seasoned junior officer, Sanderson. Your record is excellent, otherwise some form of punishment would be in order. I shouldn't need to repeat that it is your duty to keep your crew on the alert until we are out of danger. Dismissed."

The lieutenant saluted and turned to leave.

"Oh, Sanderson, one more thing." Harrigan rose and walked around the desk.

"Yes, sir?"

The admiral faced the lieutenant and, before the dumbfounded eyes of Rose, McDaniels and the orderly, very deliberately drew his service blaster and shot Sanderson dead center between the eyes.

McDaniels gulped. Rose jumped up trembling. The orderly let his mop fall with a clatter. O'Brien winked at Harrigan.

"Great hell, you've killed him." Rose found his voice.

"That I have. That, gentlemen..." Harrigan pointed to the corpse, "Is a Zith."

An immediate babble of "why's" and "how do you know's" filled the air.

"Look," the admiral motioned and the men gathered around the corpse. Harrigan stooped, ran his fingers through the thick black hair and came up with two fleshy, antenna-like appendages about four inches in length, which sprouted from the skull an inch or so above the hair-line.

"On the Zith home planet, their religion requires that the head be cleanly shaven, and these antennae are a source of pride. But when a Zith wishes to pass for a Terran, he allows his hair to grow, and as long as the antennae are kept flat, he has a fair chance of going undetected. It's one of the oddities of the Universe that the Zith and Terran, so unlike in temperament, are, to the eye, unlike only in this small way. But, in Terran company, most Ziths acquire the nervous habit of continually running their hands over their hair, to make sure that the antennae are well hidden."

"But a lot of Terrans have the habit of smoothing down their hair," Rose objected. "Isn't that pretty thin evidence to shoot a man by, if you're not sure?"

"RIGHT," O'Brien broke in, "but you notice that the admiral said the antennae were the only difference noticeable to the eye. There's another, more important difference. The chemical make-up of the Zith body is such that water reacts violently on contact with it, producing what corresponds to severe burns, usually resulting in death. The admiral and I both noticed Sanderson's nervous habit down in the gun bank a while ago. The pitcher incident a few minutes ago proved to us that Sanderson was not a Terran. You men noticed how he shook and paled when the water splashed near him."

"Then this isn't Sanderson at all?" McDaniels asked, his dark eyes wide with wonder.

"Our records indicate that a Lieutenant Vern Sanderson left Aldebaran II about three months ago to assist on the *Albion* shake-down cruise. My guess is that the real Sanderson met with foul play somewhere along the way and this . . . thing . . . was substituted. The League knew that war was coming. They also knew that the Federation has lately installed the new Dyer gun and is in the process of installing the Bergesson Hyper-drive in its capital ships. This critter was probably one of many sent to get those secrets. With them, victory for the League would be assured."

"But why kill him? Why didn't you

take him prisoner and find out what he knew?"

"For just one damned good reason," Harrigan answered. "These boys are telepathic over short distances—the antennae have something to do with that. If I hadn't taken him by complete surprise, he would have notified his pals, if any, on this ship. And, if there should happen to be a dozen or a hundred of these babies on board, we really would be in for it. O'Brien, arrange a watch on the mess hall. Have all hands who do not take water with their meals reported. You and chief Scott will have to call them in one at a time and give them the acid test."

O'Brien went off to arrange the mess hall watch and Harrigan sat down, heaving a great sigh, behind his desk. "Well, gentlemen," he said, "you have seen the enemy. Or at least half the enemy."

"Yes, sir," Rose responded, "but what about the Xantus, sir? I—we've never seen one of them."

The admiral shuddered inwardly. "I hope you never do," he confessed. All the wretched memories of two galactic campaigns swept over him again. "A Xantu looks like nothing more nor less than a beer barrel on skids, with a cauliflower for a head. Eight independently focussing eyes, one for each of the tentacles that sprout from the middle of the chest. Get one of those monkies behind a gun bank and you'll swear you have a platoon facing you." Harrigan lit a cigarette, forked smoke from his nostrils.

"The Xantus don't do too much of the actual fighting, though. Back in the early days of space conquest, they teamed up with the Ziths . . . I imagine because the Xantus have a terrific technical culture but are few in number, relatively speaking, and the Ziths aren't great on technology but have the manpower. And too, their home systems are only a few light-years apart. So far, the partnership has worked out very well for the Dark Nebula League; the Xantus providing the brains, and the Ziths the muscle. They are both ancient races, and very probably their plans for the conquest of this end of the Universe would have gone nicely if they hadn't run up against the Solar Federation, led by Terra. We stand smack across their path. It has come to the point now where it's us or them, absolutely . . ."

AFTER the Sanderson episode was settled, Harrigan suddenly felt drained and exhausted, and retired to his quarters. While he slept, O'Brien, Chief Scott and his men rounded up four more Zith spies who were immediately execnted and unceremoniously dumped into the rocket chambers. On the double-check, a fifth was discovered cowering in the captain's life boat and he soon followed his brothers. The great ship plowed through the ink of space, and the only sounds were the muffled throbbing from the rocket banks, the steady hum of the chronometer and the clicking of the audio relay.

At 0500 hours the alarm gong clanged raucously. Harrigan was struggling into his trousers as O'Brien stuck his head in the door and shouted, "Jack! They've cut us off!"

The captain explained the situation hurriedly as they sprinted toward the bridge. "Port watch just spotted 'em. Three o'clock, low, in an arc. There's only seven of them, but apparently they've taken Polaris Base and cut us off from Sector I."

A series of muffled thuds was heard, and suddenly a succession of electric, blue-white flashes from outside the ports turned the dimness of the passageway into intense, eye-straining brilliance.

"Hot hell! We must have got us one," Harrigan roared, and the two men broke into a run.

In the powerful bridge screens they could see the great cloud of smoke hanging in the void, where the League ship had been hit, and, coming through it, several more of the grim pursuers. Occasionally a beam of ripping, ravaging energy would lick out towards the *Albion*, but the slim fingers of death fell shorter of their goal by the minute.

"Well," Mike breathed in relief, "we can outrun them. But what now?"

"Better set a course for Antares IV," Harrigan advised. "The maintenance depot there can install the Hyper-drive in a few days and we can make it back to

Terra then regardless of what the League holds."

* * *

As soon as the *Albion* was safely out of range of the League ships, the two officers were joined on the bridge by Master Gunner Cliff Irvington. They discussed the narrow squeak for a few minutes. At length Irvington punched out his cigar and confessed, "I could stand a drink."

Ten minutes later they were seated in Harrigan's Spartan quarters over a bottle of good Terran Irish whiskey and a flagon of Jovian Blongah. Irvington downed an heroic shot of the Jovian mixture, shivered, howled and grabbed for the pitcher of water which the orderly had placed on the small table.

"Of all the chicken drinkers," O'Brien chaffed. "One little swig and he's halfway under the table. Watch this, son, and learn from a master of the aht." Whereupon the Captain poured a water glass full of the volatile brew and swallowed it without batting an eye.

"Nuts," Cliff grunted. "I have to stay off the stuff for months at a time. You birds on the bridge can swill from one side of the galaxy to the other, but I've got to watch my nerves. And how about that night in Venusport when I had you two guys reeling, the night before we got our commissions?"

Harrigan stifled a belch. "Only an idiot could drink that ook and stay on his pins. What was it now? Oh yes, Thunderbolt cocktail. Two parts Terran vodka, one part Irish whiskey, gin, three raw eggs, nutmeg and a jolt of Martian faylee. Cosmos! They say it made good rocket fuel in a pinch."

O'Brien sat up, glass in hand. "Why don't we mix a batch right now?"

"Don't see why not." Harrigan flipped the audio switch. "Stores. Hanson? Send a man up with formula thirteen, will you?"

When the supplies arrived a few minutes later, the three men indulged in an orgy of mixing and much testing, and, when the contents of the huge bowl met their rigid specifications, sat around it and reminisced about the early days in the Force.

The three might easily have personified the Solar Federation Space Force. Harrigan, the organizer par excellence, tall, lean and tanned by the radiation of a thousand suns. O'Brien, the admiral's life-long friend, squat and muscular—the fatherly but deadly Irishman who had hated the League with all his powerful heart since the day, dim in time but not in memory, that the Xantus had murdered his parents on Sirius III in the First Campaign. And Irvington, one of the truly fabulous characters in the Federation. The man who could reputedly hit a black basketball at three million miles with an energy gun, who flunked out of pilot's school and turned gunner, and who, annually, spent his leave mining in the Solar asteroid belt and had become the richest man in the Force.

These men led the *Albion* on its questionable course into the future. Human, and therefore prone to human failings, to be sure. But wise in the ways of space they were too, and aware of its terrible dangers.

At long last, when the ship's clock stood at 1100 hours, the party broke up. Ashtrays were piled high, the magnificent punchbowl was empty. Irvington and O'Brien left together, and Harrigan collapsed on his bunk.

In his dreams he roamed the narrow streets of Mars Center, watched the pale, reed-like dancing girls sway their sensuous bodies before the open-mouthed Federation Cadets, and heard the far-off, haunting desert music. He walked through the fairy cities of Zithobar where the fragile, ethereal architecture belied the sadistic temperament of the inhabitants. And he cruised the tainted stratosphere of the Xantu planet, that dark and sinister world whose peoples enjoyed nothing more than heaving Terran prisoners, one by one, into the mouths of roaring volcanoes.

ANATON, the Federation base on Antares IV, was six days at full blast without Hyper-drive. After the round of hectic activity surrounding their escape from Sector I, officers and crew alike found the uneventful trip restful but boring. O'Brien played endless games of soli-

taire; Irvington slept; and Harrigan planned. Anaton was the biggest Federation base in Sector II, and the Hyperdrive was there. He just hoped that the base itself was there yet. At 0300 hours on the sixth day, Antares shone like a great red eye and they were three hours out of base. Antares III swung slowly past and Harrigan alerted the crew.

They didn't have long to wait. O'Brien had just stacked his cards away when the starboard watch howled and three Xantu ships screamed across the *Albion* bow, almost on collision course. Harrigan's hrow wrinkled as the tail ship dropped back to engage the *Albion* and the other two fled. These were not the usual Xantu tactics. Irvington coolly got the black craft hetween his sights, there was a whoosh and a hlinding blast and four billion square miles of space flashed into daylight. The *Albion* quickly overtook the two remaining ships and gun-banks three, four and five riddled one of them. It slowed, spun and became a lifeless, drifting shell.

But the pilot of ship three was no fool. He suddenly swiveled his ship, boomed off at a tangent, and, as the *Albion* whipped hy, his gunner caught her full in the tubes with a full charge from the stern guns. Now it was the *Albion's* turn to spin end for end. But as the Xantu craft spun into his sights for a fraction of a second, Irvington tripped the atomic cannon again. The bolt ricochetted off the Xantu's bow and the ship slowly split down the center like an over-ripe melon. From the bridge, Harrigan counted three life boats deserting the mother ship and he watched the gunners vainly try to pick them off. But they were too small a target, and they quickly merged into the sanctuary of darkness.

He huzzed O'Brien. "Let's get down to Drive, quick. They got that Xantu hlast dead center."

The drive section was a shambles. Men in weird asbestos suits and masks staggered through the smoke and fumes with the hroken bodies of the rocket crew that had been caught in the explosion. Harrigan hrushed at angry tears as they carried Joe Merrick—the officer in charge—past them and laid the charred body beside the others. Merrick had been with him through both campaigns, and now the bitterness within Harrigan turned to grim resolution. At length, thirty-seven men were counted out of action permanently. The admiral turned solemnly away.

"Think we'd better set her down on III?" O'Brien asked quietly.

"Guess so, Mike. We can take her down on anti-grav and maneuver with the bow jets." And then, slowly, "This puts us out of the war, you realize that . . ."

"Yeah. And we can't even holler for help or they'll swarm in on us like a pack of harpies."

"I don't know about that, Mike. Those boats that got away will probably alert other elements of the League fleet as to our location. It's only a matter of time anyway. So we might as well hreak radio silence and try to get some Federation ships here first. It'll be a race, but it's the only chance we've got."

Radio room sent the S.O.S. and rang back the hridge almost immediately. "Message away, sir, hut our receiver was knocked out by the hlast. We get no acknowledgment on S.O.S."

"Oh great," Harrigan groaned, "that's all we needed."

"Maybe we could make Anaton on the bow jets," O'Brien offered.

"Douhtful. Besides, we don't want to chance being caught in space with the *Albion* in this shape. If my guess is any good, those three ships were part of a fleet which has just attacked Anaton and by now the base is probahly a smoking hole in the ground. No point in going to something like that."

IT TOOK superhuman maneuvering and quite a bit of luck, but at last the scarred battleship came to rest, in partial hiding, at the foot of a cliff wall on the rugged, boulder-strewn surface of Antares III. Space Directory termed the planet "Earth-type; diam. 9,300; atmosphere hreathable for Terrans for a period not to exceed twelve hours."

Harrigan had the portable Dyer guns arranged in a semi-circle at advantageous spots behind boulders up to one mile from

the *Albion*, in case the survivors of the League ships might set their boats down nearby and attempt a coup over land. The *Albion's* own boats carried out patrols in the hope of locating the enemy before the enemy located them.

For sixteen hours after the landing, everything was absolutely quiet. And then, as relief gun-crews slogged out the main hatch to take their positions at the portables, all Hell broke loose.

A short range, explosive rocket shell arched perfectly into the hatch and exploded with a deafening roar, scattering the relief crews like ten pins and slamming the two ton hatch cover clean off its swivel pins. The three League boats, with devastating surprise, zoomed in low and fast over the outlying gun positions, spraying a trail of Reezi powder which was ignited by their rockets. The countryside went up in a swirl and a flash. Another explosive rocket struck the *Albion* amidships before the crews got the more cumbersome fixed guns into firing position.

The lightning-fast boats were too small and swift to be speared by anything save a lucky shot. Back and forth they raked the almost helpless battleship. The attack waned momentarily as one of the black boats was caught and instantly charred by cross-fire from the *Albion* one and four banks. The remaining two changed tactics, roaring in over the big ship, past the top of the cliff, only to spin back, hit and run.

Five of the *Albion* patrol boats skittered home only to be caught in the fray and immediately knocked down. Three more met the same fate and a fourth was dodging desperately for its life when Harrigan's eyes popped wide open with amazement. A pencil-like, silver destroyer escort, bearing the insignia of the Federation Forces, fell on the League boats from zenith position and in a screaming, twisting dive blasted one and rammed the other into flying rubbish.

The silver ship climbed a few miles vertically to see if the field had been properly cleared, flashed down and dusted to a stop beside the *Albion*. Harrigan stepped over the smoking bodies in the main hatchway and dropped to the ground. O'Brien sprinted to join him, but before they could reach the other ship, an officer leaped from a belly-lock and walked briskly towards them.

He snapped a salute. "Admiral Harrigan and the *Albion?*" he asked.

"Right, Lieutenant," Harrigan smiled wearily. "You're very welcome."

"Lieutenant Sanderson, sir, Third Fleet attack arm. I was supposed . . ."

"Sanderson," O'Brien roared.

"Yes, sir. I was assigned to the *Albion*, sir, but it took me ten weeks to walk halfway around Pluto from where the Ziths dumped me and catch a ship to Terra base. I take it they dubbed one of their beasties in for me?"

"They sure did," Harrigan answered, "but there wasn't much harm done. I killed you on the bridge, Lieutenant."

"Oh?" Sanderson looked puzzled for a brief moment, then smiled. "Oh, that's good."

"What's the score now?" O'Brien asked.

"Well, sir, the Third attack fleet is standing off Anton now. You have probably guessed that part of a League fleet attacked the base. We picked up a few survivors, but damned few. Then we picked up a weak distress signal from this area and Admiral Brands had us check on it."

"Good thing he did," Harrigan admitted. "And now, Lieutenant, if you will be so good as to radio for a tub to pick us up, I will be most happy to leave this planet."

"Yes, sir, at once." Sanderson saluted and ran for his ship.

THREE HOURS and a few odd minutes later, the transport tub *Avalon* settled its ponderous bulk beside the *Albion* and the slow transfer of the living and the dead began. One hundred and fifty-five bodies were slated for burial on Terra; another sixty were missing, whiffed into gas by League guns.

Harrigan sank deeper into gloom as he removed the ship's log and helped O'Brien check the men off the *Albion*. At last the loading was completed; the *Avalon* hung for a moment on its anti-gravs, and Harrigan and Commander Johnson, in charge

of the tub, looked down on the battered remains of the great craft.

"Better come to the bridge and sit," Johnson said softly.

On the bridge, he poured Harrigan a stiff drink and cautioned, "Swallow that, and get ready."

Harrigan complied, puzzled. No sooner had he placed his glass on the table than a small but virile mule kicked him in the stomach.

"Suffering . . . what was that?" he gasped.

Johnson smiled. "Hyper-drive. Apparently Tech hasn't got the bugs worked out yet, but it's good enough for me. Only four hours to Terra."

"Well, well," Harrigan mused. He rose and looked at the swirling grayness outside the ports. "Same deal on the other end?"

"Yeah. A little wrench in the gut, but you get used to it."

Harrigan said, "Well, well," again and sat down.

"Admiral," Johnson hesitated, "no offense, now, you understand, but I have been wondering what the *Albion* was doing way out here on Antares III. I understood that you were coming into Terra from the other side of Sector I when the fracas started."

"We were. But when the League took Polaris Base and cut us off we had to . . ."

"Took Polaris Base! The League didn't take Polaris Base. They had a dozen or so cruisers in that area, but they didn't tackle the Base. Didn't even make a pa: at it."

Harrigan slowly dropped his head into his hands.

"Oh my God," he moaned, "and I lost two hundred men on a bad guess. I deserve to be broken to a Spaceman third class for this." He jumped up and paced the bridge. "Great guns, what a fool I am! Polaris intact and I risk a ship-load of green men on a bad guess. This washes me up in the Force, that's for damn sure."

"Oh, I don't think so, Admiral." Johnson smiled. "In fact I think that . . ."

"I don't give a damn what you think, Commander. The Force is no place for fools. I'm done." And Harrigan slammed off the bridge towards his quarters.

Johnson smiled faintly and poured himself a drink.

IT WAS a tired and bedraggled admiral who stepped off the *Avalon* four hours later into the sunlit bustle of Terra Base I. He felt pride well up in him at the sight of the powerful base, the battlewagons and cruisers and squat tubs, some with their guts spread on the steel docks, waiting for the 'drive installation. Crane winches clanked and howled, welding torches flashed, and many-wheeled trailers sped about with ponderous equipment. But the activity was not frantic; it was efficient and orderly.

He turned for a word with O'Brien, who was now puffing down the gangway, when a bright young Spaceman First stepped up and saluted with a grin. "Admiral Garrison's regards to Admiral Harrigan and Captain O'Brien, and would they report to HQ at once."

"Well, here it comes, Mike."

"Guess so," Mike agreed gloomily. "Why are all these baboons so happy?" He indicated the clustered groups of Spacemen who regarded them smilingly as they passed and talked excitedly among themselves.

"Dunno. Maybe they like the thought of admirals and captains getting chewed down."

They paused briefly outside the door marked:

Adm. Garrison, G.G.
Port Admiral

O'Brien shrugged. "Here goes nothin'."

Inside, the tall, balding man behind the desk jumped to his feet with a grin. "Jack! Mike! Boy, you two guys certainly beat anything I ever saw. Talk about your heroes . . ."

"Cut it, George," Harrigan growled, "you don't have to rub it in."

"Rub what in? Great Caesar, hasn't anyone told you yet? You guys won the war, that's all!"

"Yeah. On the seat of our pants at Antares III." O'Brien muttered.

"But I'm telling you, damnit!" Garrison came around the desk and clapped

them on the shoulders. "Those League ships you brought down were heading for home with the Hyper-drive secret. And you stopped them."

Slow and stunning realization dawned on the two officers. O'Brien gave a long, low whistle and sank in his chair. Harrigan broke into a slow grin.

"What a deal!" Garrison rubbed his hands. "What a deal. You guys will get promotions out of this or my name isn't George Garr . . ."

"But what the hell happened?" Harrigan demanded.

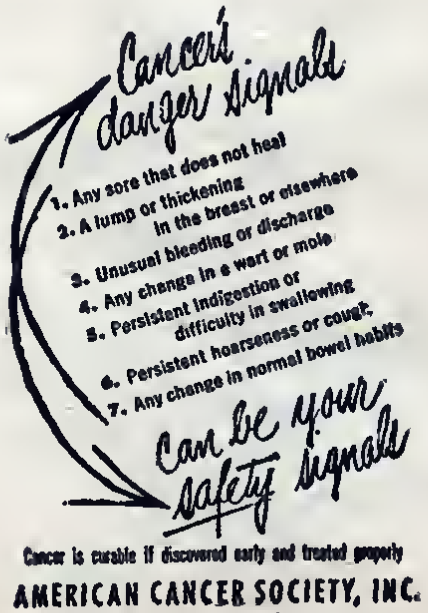
"Like this," Garrison explained. "Three League ships picked up spies just off Anaton. They had the Hyper-drive papers. Then they threw a Duodec bomb into the Base and high-tailed. The *Albion* was the only Federation ship of any size left in commission in the area. You got them. Just before the last League ship went down, it beamed a message to Zithobar, which we intercepted. So the Third attack arm swung over quick to see what the trouble was. Then we got your S.O.S. and went after you before the League could get back for a little of its well-known vengeance."

"Now, what the devil?" Harrigan rubbed his chin, grinning. "Is the war over, then?"

"Not altogether, but it's just a matter of mopping up now, and fixing Zithobar and the Xantu planet once and for all. The Third and Seventh attack arms are completely equipped with the 'drive and the Second is just about ready to roll. Brother, are those babies surprised when we pop out of nowhere into the middle of their formations and burn them down before they can aim a gun . . . but if *they* had hooked onto the 'drive secret, it would have been all day for the Federation!" Garrison threw back his head and roared with laughter. "You birds . . . with a green crew—" he held his sides—"with a tub full of greenies you win the war. And by accident yet. Oh Lordie . . ." he sat down to catch his breath.

"Well . . . I'll . . . be . . . a . . ." Harrigan shook his head.

"Yeah. I'll be one too," O'Brien muttered.



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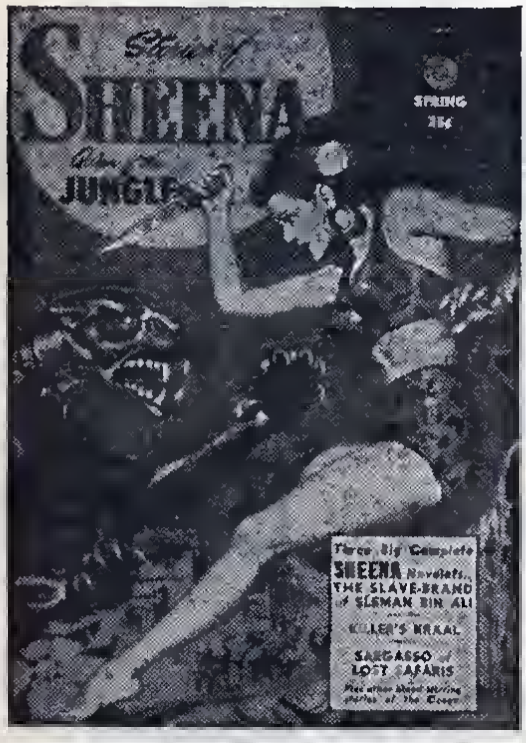

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Two six-armed three-headed creatures emerged . . . "Oh, no," Bill said . . .

garrigan's Bems

by

MACK REYNOLDS

and

FREDERIC BROWN

THERE WERE SIX LETTERS IN Bill Garrigan's box, but he could tell from a quick glance at the envelopes that not one of them was a check. Would-be gags from would-be gagmen. And, nine chances out of ten, not a yak in the lot.

He carried them back to the adobe hut he called his studio before bothering to open them. He tossed his disreputable hat onto the two-burner kerosene stove. He

sat down and twisted his legs around the legs of the kitchen chair before the rickety table which doubled as a place to eat and his drawing board.

It had been a long time since the last sale and he hoped, even though he didn't dare expect, that there'd be a really salable gag in this lot. Miracles *do* happen.

He tore open the first envelope. Six gags from some guy up in Oregon, sent to him on the usual basis; if he liked any of them he'd draw them up and if they sold the guy got a percentage. Bill Garrigan looked at the first one. It read:

GUY AND GAL DRIVE UP TO RESTAURANT. SIGN ON CAR READS "HERMAN THE FIRE EATER." THROUGH WINDOWS OF RESTAURANT PEOPLE EATING BY CANDLE LIGHT.
GUY: "OH, BOY, THIS LOOKS LIKE A GOOD PLACE TO EAT!"

Bill Garrigan groaned and looked at the next card. And the next. And the next. He opened the next envelope. And the next.

This was getting really bad. Cartooning is a tough racket to make a living in, even when you live in a little town in the Southwest where living doesn't cost you much. And once you started slipping—well, the thing was a vicious circle. As your stuff was seen less and less often in the big markets, the best gagmen started sending their material elsewhere. You wound up with the left-overs, which, of course, put the skids under you that much worse.

He pulled the last gag from the final envelope. It read:

SCENE ON SOME OTHER PLANET. EMPEROR OF SNOOK, A HIDEOUS MONSTER, IS TALKING TO SOME OF HIS SCIENTISTS.
EMPEROR: "YES, I UNDERSTAND THAT YOU'VE DEVISED A METHOD OF VISITING EARTH, BUT WHO WOULD WANT TO WITH ALL THOSE HORRIBLE LOOKING HUMANS LIVING THERE?"

BILL GARRIGAN scratched the end of his nose thoughtfully. It had possibilities. After all, the science-fiction market was growing like mad. And if he could draw these extra-terrestrial creatures hideous enough to bring out the gag—

He reached for a pencil and a piece of paper and started to sketch out a rough. The first version of the Emperor and his scientists didn't look quite ugly enough. He crumpled up the paper and reached for another piece.

Let's see. He could give each one of the monsters three heads, each head with eight protruding, goggling eyes. Half a dozen stubby arms. Hmmm, not bad. Very long torsos, very short legs. Four apiece, front ones bending one way, back ones the other. Splay feet. Now how about the face, outside of the eight eyes? Leave 'em blank below the eyes. A mouth, a big one, in the middle of the chest. That way a monster wouldn't get to arguing with himself as to which head should do the eating.

He added a few quick lines for the background; he looked upon his work and it was good. Maybe too good; maybe editors would think their readers too squeamish to look upon such terrible monstrosities. And yet, unless he made them as horrible as he could, the gag would be lost.

In fact, maybe he could make them even a little more hideous. He tried, and found that he could.

He worked on the rough until he was sure he'd got as much as could be drawn out of the gag, found an envelope and addressed it to his best market—or what had been his best market up to several months ago when he'd started slipping. He'd made his last sale there fully two months ago. But maybe they'd take this one; Rod Corey, the editor, liked his cartoons a bit on the bizarre side.

Bill Garrigan had almost forgotten the submission by the time it came back almost six weeks later.

He tore open the envelope. The rough was there with a big red "O.K. Let's have a finish," scrawled to one side of it and with the initials "R.C." beneath.

He'd eat again!

Bill made it back from the post office in double time, brushed the odds and ends of food, books and clothing from the table top and reached for paper, pencil, pen and ink.

He wedged the rough between a milk can and a dirty saucer to work from it, and he stared at it until he got himself back in the frame of mind he'd been in when he'd first roughed out the idea.

He did a job of it, because Rod Corey's market was in there with the best; the only one that gave him seventy-five bucks a crack. Of course some of the really top markets paid higher than that to name-cartoonists, but Bill Garrigan had lost any delusions of his own grandeur. Sure, he'd give his right arm to hit the top, but it didn't seem likely to happen. And right now he'd settle for selling enough to keep him eating.

He took almost two hours to complete the finish, did it up carefully with cardboard and made his way back to the post office. He mailed it and rubbed his hands with satisfaction. Money in the bank. He'd be able to get the broken transmission fixed on his jalopy and be on wheels again, and he'd be able to catch up fractionally on his grocery and rent bills to boot. Only it was a shame that old R. C. wasn't quicker pay.

As a matter of fact the check didn't come until the day the issue containing the cartoon hit the stands. But in the meantime he'd made a couple of small sales to trade magazines and hadn't actually gone hungry. Still in all the check looked wonderful when it came.

He cashed it at the bank on his way from the post office and stopped off at the Sagebrush Tap for a couple of quick ones. And they tasted so good and made him feel so cheerful that he stopped at the liquor store and picked up a bottle of Metaxa. He couldn't afford Metaxa, of course—who can?—but somewhere along the line a man has to do a reasonable amount of celebrating.

ONCE HOME, he opened the bottle of precious Greek brandy, had a couple of slugs of it and then settled his long body into the chair, propped his scuffed shoes on the rickety table and let out a sigh of pure contentment. Tomorrow he'd regret the money he'd spent and he'd probably have a hangover to boot, but tomorrow was mañana.

Reaching out a hand he picked the least dirty of the glasses within his reach and poured a stiff shot into it. Maybe, he thought, fame is the food of the soul and he'd never be a famous cartoonist, but this afternoon at least cartooning was giving with the liquor of the gods.

He raised the glass toward his lips, but he didn't quite make it. His eyes widened.

Before him, the adobe wall seemed to shimmer, quiver, shake. Then, slowly, a small aperture appeared. It enlarged, grew, widened; suddenly it was the size of a doorway.

Bill darted a reproachful look at the brandy. *Hell,* he told himself, *I've hardly touched it.* His unbelieving eyes went back to the doorway in the wall. It could be an earthquake. In fact, it must be. What else—

Two six-armed three-headed creatures emerged. Each had three heads and each head had six goggling eyes. Four legs, a mouth in the middle of—

"Oh, no," Bill said.

Each of the creatures held an awesome, respect-inspiring gunlike object. Each pointed it at Bill Garrigan.

"Gentlemen," Bill said, "I realize that this is one of the most potent drinks on earth, but, so help me, two jiggers couldn't do *this.*"

The monsters stared at him and shuddered and each one closed all but one of its twenty-four eyes.

"Hideous indeed," said the first one to have come through the aperture. "The most hideous specimen in the solar system, is he not, Agol?"

"Me?" said Bill Garrigan, faintly.

"You. But do not be afraid. We have come not to harm you but to take you into the mighty presence of Bon Whir III, Emperor of Snook, where you will be suitably rewarded."

"How? For what? Where's—Snook?"

"Will you please ask questions one at a

time? I could answer all three of those simultaneously, one with each head, but I fear you are not equipped to understand multiple communication."

Bill Garrigan closed his eyes. "You've got three heads, but only one mouth. How can you talk three ways with only one mouth?"

The monster's mouth laughed. "What makes you think we talk with our mouths? We only laugh with them. We eat by osmosis. We talk by vibrating diaphragms in the tops of our heads. Now, which of your three previous questions do you wish answered?"

"How will I be rewarded?"

"The Emperor did not tell us. But it will be a great reward. It is our duty merely to bring you. These weapons are merely a precaution in case you resist. And they do not kill; we are too civilized to kill. They merely stun."

"You aren't really there," Bill said. He opened his eyes and quickly closed them again. "I've never touched a reefer in my life. Nor had D. T.'s, and I couldn't suddenly get them on only two brandies —well, four if you count the ones at the bar."

"You are ready to go with us?"

"Go *where?*"

"To Snook."

"Where's that?"

"The fifth planet, retrograde, of System K-14-320-GM, Space Continuum 1745-88JHT-97608."

"Where, with relation to here?"

The monster gestured with one of his six arms. "Immediately through that aperture in your wall. Are you ready?"

"*No.* What am I being rewarded for? That cartoon? How did you see it?"

"Yes. For that cartoon. We are thoroughly familiar with your world and civilization; it is parallel to ours but in a different continuum. We are people with a great sense of humor. We have artists but no cartoonists; we lack that faculty. The cartoon you drew is, to us, excruciatingly funny. Already, everyone in Snook is laughing at it. Are you now ready?"

"No," said Bill Garrigan.

Both monsters lifted their guns. Two clicks came simultaneously.

"YOU ARE CONSCIOUS again," a voice told him. "This way to the throne room, please."

There wasn't any use arguing. Bill went. He was here now, wherever *here* was, and maybe they'd reward him by letting him go back if he behaved himself.

The room was familiar. Just as he'd drawn it. And he'd have recognized the Emperor anywhere. Not only the Emperor, but the scientists who were with him.

Could, conceivably, it have been coincidence that he had drawn a scene and creatures that actually existed? Or—hadn't he read somewhere the theory that there existed an infinite number of universes in an infinite number of space-time continuums, so that any state of being of which one could possibly think actually existed somewhere? He'd thought that had sounded ridiculous when he'd read it, but he wasn't so sure now.

A voice from somewhere—it sounded as though from an amplifier—said, "The great, the mighty Emperor Bon Whir III, Leader of the Faithful, Commander of the Glories, Receiver of the Light, Lord of the Galaxies, Beloved of His People."

It stopped and Bill said, "Bill Garrigan."

The Emperor laughed, with his mouth. "Thank you, Bill Garrigan," he said, "for giving us the best langh of our lifetimes. I have had you brought here to reward you. I hereby offer you the post of Royal Cartoonist. A post which has not existed before, since we have no cartoonists. Your sole duty will be to draw one cartoon a day."

"One a day? But where'll I get the gags?"

"We will supply them. We have excellent gags; each of us has a magnificent sense of humor, both creative and appreciative. We can, however, draw only representationally. You will be the greatest man on this planet, next to me." He laughed. "Maybe you'll be even more popular than I—although my people really do like me."

"I—I guess not," Bill said. "I think I'd rather go back to—Say, what does the job pay? Maybe I could take it for a while and take some money—or some equivalent—back to Earth."

"The pay will be beyond your dreams of

avarice. You will have everything you want. And you may accept it for one year, with the option of life-tenure if you so wish at the end of the year."

"Well—" Bill said. He was wondering just how much money *would* be beyond his dreams of avarice. A devil of a lot, he guessed. He'd go back to Earth rich, all right.

"I urge you to accept," said the Emperor. "Every cartoon you draw—and you may draw more than one a day if you wish—will be published in every publication on the planet. You will draw royalties from each."

"How many publications have you?"

"Over a hundred thousand. Twenty billion people read them."

"Well," Bill said, "maybe I should try it a year. But—uh—"

"What?"

"How'll I get along here, outside of cartooning? I mean, I understand that physically I'm hideous to you, as hideous as you are to—I mean, I won't have any friends. I certainly couldn't make friends with—I mean—"

"That has already been taken care of, in anticipation of your acceptance, and while you were unconscious. We have the greatest physicians and plastic surgeons in any of the universes. The wall behind you is a mirror. If you will turn—"

Bill Garrigan turned. He fainted.

ONE of Bill Garrigan's heads sufficed to concentrate on the cartoon he was drawing, directly in ink. He didn't bother with roughs any more. They weren't necessary with the multiplicity of eyes that enabled him to see what he was doing from so many angles at the same time.

His second head was thinking of the great wealth in his bank account and his tremendous power and popularity here. True, the money was in copper, which was the precious metal in this world, but there was enough copper to sell for a fortune on Earth. Too bad, his second head thought, that he couldn't take back his power and popularity with him.

His third head was talking to the Emperor. The Emperor came to see him sometimes, these days. "Yes," the Emperor was saying, "the time is up tomorrow, but I hope we can persuade you to stay. Your own terms, of course. And, since we do not want to use coercion, our plastic surgeons will restore you to your original—uh—shape—"

Bill Garrigan's mouth, in the middle of his chest, grinned. It was wonderful to be so appreciated. His fourth collection of cartoons had just been published and had sold ten million copies on this planet alone, besides exports to the rest of the system. It wasn't the money; he already had more than he could ever spend, here. And the convenience of three heads and six arms—

His first head looked up from the cartoon and came to rest on his secretary. She saw him looking, and her eyestalks dropped coyly. She was very beautiful. He hadn't made any passes at her yet; he'd wanted to be sure which way he'd decide, about going back to Earth. His second head thought about a girl he'd known once back on his original planet and he shuddered and jerked his mind away from thinking about her. Good Lord, she'd been hideous.

One of the Emperor's heads had caught sight of the almost-finished cartoon and his mouth was laughing hysterically.

Yes, it was wonderful to be appreciated. Bill's first head kept on looking at Thwil, his beautiful secretary, and she flushed a faint but beautiful yellow under his stare.

"Well, pal," Bill's third head said to the Emperor, "I'll think it over. Yeah, I'll think it over."

There was a splintering crash, a crackling burst of flame . . .

lake of fire

When you've been to Mars, when you've struggled with men and ships and supplies like some tremendous Herculean figure in the morning of the world, you'll never really feel at home on Earth . . .

STEVE FOUND the mirror in the great northwestern desert. It was lying half-buried in the sand, and the wind howled in fury over it, and when he bent to pick it up the sun smote him like a shining blade, dividing his tall body into blinding light and wavering shadow.

I knew it was a Martian mirror before he straightened. The craftsmanship was breathtaking and could not have been duplicated on Earth. It was shaped like an ordinary hand mirror; but its glass surface was like a lake of fire, with depth beyond depth to it, and the jewels sparkling at its rim were a deep aquamarine which seemed to transmute the sun-glow into shimmering bands of starlight.

I could have told Steve that such mir-

by FRANK BELKNAP LONG

rors, by their very nature, were destructive. When a man carries a hopeless vision of loveliness about with him, when he lives with that vision night and day, he ceases to be the undisputed master of his own destiny—

"She's alive, Jim," Steve said. "A woman dead fifty thousand years. A woman from a civilization that flourished before the dawn of human history."

"Take it easy, Steve," I warned. "The Martians simply knew how to preserve every aspect of a mirrored image. Say howdedo to her if you like. Press your lips to the glass and see what happens. But don't mistake an imitation of life for the real thing."

"An imitation of life!" Steve flared. "Man, she just smiled at me. She's aware of us, I tell you."

"Sure she is. Her brain was mirrored too, every aspect of its electro-dynamic structure preserved forever by a science that's lost forever. Get a grip on yourself, Steve."

I was hot and tired and dusty. My throat was parched and I didn't feel much like arguing with him. But I had my reasons for being stubborn.

"Men have found Martian mirrors and gone mad," I said. "Don't take any chances, Steve. We don't know yet what it's rigged with. Why not play it safe? A thousand cycles of direct current should melt it down."

"Melt *her* down!" Steve's eyes narrowed in sudden fury. "Why, it would be murder!"

STEVE GOT UP and brushed sand from his knees. He held the mirror up so that the red Martian sunlight caught and aureoled the splendor of a face that offered a man no chance of help if he ever let go.

A pale, beautiful face, the eyes fringed with long, dark lashes, the lips parted in a mocking smile. A living image capable of mercurial changes of mood, unnaturally still one moment, smiling and animated the next.

One thing at a time, I thought. *Don't drive him too hard.*

"Some men have carried them about for years," I said. "But just remember what falling in love with an image can mean. You'll never hold her in your arms, Steve. And compulsions can kill."

"She's alive as flesh-and-blood is alive," he said, glaring at me.

"Easy, Steve!"

I could see that I was going to have trouble with my stout-hearted buddy, Captain Stephen Claymore.

He could have stared at a mountain of gold unmoved. He could have knelt with a wry chuckle, and let a handful of diamonds trickle through his wiry, bronze-knuckled hands, in utter contempt for what diamonds could buy on Earth.

He could have thrown back his head and laughed, at wealth, at glory, at anything you want to name that men prize highly on Earth. But a beautiful woman was a temptation apart. A beautiful woman—

Steve grabbed my arm. "Look out, Tom!" he cried. "Watch it!"

The bullet whizzed past like a heat-maddened insect. Steve leapt back, and I flattened myself.

The attack was no great surprise. When people take up a new way of life, when they pull up stakes and go striding into the sunrise, strife paces after like a ravenous hound, red tongue lolling. When the first colonists from Earth swarmed into the crumbling Martian cities a good third of them ended up in stony desolation with their hearts drilled through.

They danced to riotous tunes, calling for louder music and stronger wine, and they fought savagely to set up little kingdoms of tyranny eighty feet square.

Everywhere anarchy reigned, and haggard-eyed, desperate men crouched behind smoke-blackened ruins and held off other men as greedy as themselves. They fought and died by dozens, by hundreds, their minds inflamed by the quickly-made discovery that the Martian cities were vast treasure troves.

You had to go prospecting, you had to search, and when you found your own shining treasure you didn't want to share it with any man alive.

Steve had his gun trained on the wall ahead when he ducked down at my side.

"Yes, sir," I whispered, half to myself. "This is going to be rough!"

"They asked for it!" Steve said.

His gun roared twice.

From the wall ahead came a burst of gunfire in reply.

"If they think they're going to get this mirror away from me—"

I looked at his grim, sweat-beaded face. "I'll help you fight for it," I said.

"So nice of you," he grunted.

"Then maybe you'll have sense enough to bury it face down in the sand."

GUNS WENT OFF thirty feet directly in front of us. Red sand geysered up, granite cracked and splintered. You could feel the awful heat of the blazing exchange of bullets.

I could see faces between the chinks. Malignant faces moving from peep-hole to peep-hole like scavenger birds hopping about in the desert.

I was aiming at one of the peep-holes when Steve groaned and sagged against me. His gun arm sagged, and I could see that a bullet had pierced his shoulder high up.

"I'm sorry, Tom," he whispered, hoarsely. "I was careless, damn it!"

"Never mind, Steve," I said.

"Now they'll close in and get you. Better take my gun. You can use two guns."

"I won't need two guns, Steve," I said. "I'm walking into the open with my hands raised."

"You're crazy!" he breathed, his eyes on my face. "We're outnumbered five to one. They'll drop you the instant you step out from behind this wall."

My gun was hot and smoking. I smiled and tossed it to the sand.

"I'll be back in a minute and fix up that shoulder," I said.

"You'll be walking to your death," he said. "They've been trailing us for days, hoping we'd stumble on something. They must have seen me pick up that mirror."

"They trailed us because they thought we looked experienced, rugged," I said. "They thought we were following a map. They just haven't got what it takes to go prospecting for themselves. They're hyenas of the desert, Steve."

"All right—hyenas. That means they won't respect a white flag. If you walk out with your hands raised they'll burn you down before you've taken five steps."

I steadied my helmet and unloosed my collar so that I wouldn't feel cramped.

"Don't worry, Steve," I said.

I knew they saw me the instant I stepped out from behind the wall.

The silence was ominous, and I could feel their eyes upon me, hot and deadly.

I didn't raise my hands. It didn't seem quite right to let them think I was seeking a truce. A man may be a fool to play fair with killers, but something made me change my mind about raising my hands.

I'd give them their chance—ten seconds. I wouldn't try to bargain for those ten seconds by walking toward them under false colors. I'd just trust to luck and—

STEVE had never seen the weapon I held in my palm. It was a tiny electrostatic accelerator tube, capable of flexible, high precision control of ions with energies up to twelve million electron-volts.

It was a simple thing—and unbelievably destructive. It made no sound at all. But ten seconds after I clicked it on, the desert directly in my path was glowing white hot.

Just a glow, white, dazzling for an instant. Then a dull rumbling shook the ground and the wall opposite blackened and crumbled. The heat was like a blast of incandescent helium gas from a man-made sun.

I turned and walked back to where Steve was lying.

"I didn't want to do it that way," I said. "But I had no choice. It was them—or us."

Steve seemed not to realize we were no longer in danger. There was fear in his eyes, and he was staring at me as if I'd just returned from the dead.

In a way I had. A man may die fifty deaths while counting off ten seconds in his mind.

"I'll give you something to help you

sleep, Steve," I said.

It didn't take me long to dress and bind up his wound. He winced once or twice, but he never took his eyes from the mirror.

"You promised to bury it face down in the sand," I said.

He looked at me. "You know better than that," he said. "I promised nothing of the sort."

"It's like falling in love with a ghost, only worse," I said.

"That's where you're wrong. There's nothing ghostly about her."

I mixed him a sleeping draught, using the little water we had left.

In five minutes he was snoring. I pried the mirror from his fingers and propped it up against a rock, so that he could see her face when he woke up.

Then I stretched myself out in the sand, kicked off my shoes and stared up at the sky. The sun was just sinking to rest, and there was a thin sprinkling of stars in the middle of the sky.

The stars seemed cold and immeasurably remote.

Would it work out?

Could it possibly work out? Was I sticking out my neck in a gamble so big it was like attempting to pierce the sun, and hammer out a new humanity on a great blazing anvil heated to millions of degrees centigrade?

I laughed, alone with my thoughts. Nothing dared, nothing gained. What does a man gain by striking bargains with the mouse in himself?

I AWOKE in the cool dawn. The morning mists had rolled back and the red desert looked almost beautiful in the sun glow.

Steve was sitting up, staring at the mirror. The light shifted suddenly, and I could see the radiance which smouldered in the depths of the glass.

I got up, walked to the wall and peered over Steve's shoulder. The girl was looking at him, her face so beautiful it fairly took my breath away. It was as though after a lifetime of wandering she'd found the only man in the world for her.

Her face was bright with sympathy, with compassion for Steve. But Steve sat slumped in utter dejection, his eyes burning holes in his face. He didn't even look up when I spoke to him.

"She knows, Tom," he whispered, hoarsely. "She turned pale when that bullet hit me. She was relieved when you dressed the wound. She's been watching over me all night, like an angel of mercy."

"You'll need her more and more," I said. "You know what the end will be, Steve. Complete hopelessness in an empty room."

He stood up, his face savage.

"I never asked your advice," he ground out. "I'm not asking it now."

"I've got to save you, Steve," I said.

"I love her, do you hear? I don't care what happens to me!"

I picked up the mirror before he could guess my purpose. I swung about and I brought that rare and beautiful object down on the rock Steve had been sitting on.

There was a splintering crash, a crackling burst of white flame.

Steve gave a great despairing cry. He stood for an instant staring down at the shattered fragments of the mirror. Then he came at me like a charging bull, his eyes bloodshot.

I clipped him lightly on the jaw.

"That's all I wanted to know, Steve," I said. "Thanks, pal."

I looked down at him, lying in a crumpled heap at my feet.

I was glad he hadn't fallen on his wounded side. He was plenty sturdy, and he came from a long-lived family, and I didn't think a little clip on the jaw could hurt him. I hoped he'd forgive me when he woke up. That was important, because I thought a lot of Steve.

When you've been to Mars, when you've fought your way through the red and raging dust storms, and labored beneath the naked glare of the sun, and juggled with men and ships and supplies like some tremendous Herculean figure in the morning of the world, you'll never really feel at home on Earth. You'll see the world of ordinary men and women as a vision of Lilliput, too small to be measurable in terms of human worth. You'll be

lost and helpless, blind and staggering beneath the weight of a memory you can't throw off. A memory of bigness, too much bigness, integrated into your every fiber, as much a part of you as the beating of your heart.

You'll lurch and over-reach yourself, you'll never feel at home on Earth, never really at home. You'll find a way to come back to Mars.

I smiled down at Steve.

So Steve had come back to go prospecting, like an ordinary greed-driven man, and only I knew he was one of the scant dozen great constructive geniuses who had made possible man's conquest of space.

He was an engineer, a physicist and—a man in need of a partner. So I'd just stepped up and introduced myself. Tom Gierson, who knew every square foot of Mars. For my purpose one Earth name was as good as another, and Tom Gierson had a sturdy ring.

Hard-bitten Tom Gierson, bronzed by the harsh Martian sunlight, as much at home in the desert as the sturdy little spiked plants that thrust their way up through the parched soil when the spring begins to break.

Steve's finest achievement was years in the past, but he was a young man still, with a young man's need of a woman as great as himself to share every moment of his waking life. That woman was waiting for him, but I had to be sure that he'd really go berserk if I smashed the glass.

I was sure now.

I raised my arm, and out of the ruins the Martians came.

STEADY HANDS lifted Steve up, and a hushed silence ringed Steve round.

"Azala," I said. "Where is she—"

Then I saw her. She was advancing straight toward me through the glare of sunset on desert sand, a shining eagerness in her eyes. The girl of the mirror, young and straight and alive, her hair the color of red sand and sunset glow, her eyes twin dark stars.

She paused before me and raised her eyes in questioning wonder.

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"Go to him," I said. "He will never love another woman. I can promise you that."

She ran to Steve with a little glad cry and fell to her knees beside him. I wanted to break through the circle and slap Steve on the back, and wish him all the happiness on Mars. The first Earthian to wed a Martian, and it was tremendous, and I wanted to tell Steve—

But how could I tell him that Martians had numerous ways of watching Earthians, the very best being mirrors which were really two-way televisual instruments. How could I tell him that the alert Martian women had all been trained to watch and observe Earthians day and night? And all the while the Earthians thought they were carrying about with them, in beautiful jeweled artifacts of a dead culture, the living images of their heart's desire!

Steve was awake now and sitting up straight, and the image was warm and alive in his arms. But how could I make Steve understand? I had a wild impulse to say: "I'd change places with you if I could, Steve. She's just about the cutest kid I know."

You get to thinking that way when

you've mingled with Earthians around desert campfires, studying them as you'd study a new neighbor who comes knocking at your door, the neighbor you fear at first and are never quite sure of until you really get to know and like him.

You see, we had so much to offer one another. A young race, constructive, brawling, shouting its defiance to the stars. And an old race, imaginative, sensitive, heirs to a civilization on the wane, but needing just a few Steves to make it young and great again.

I'd picked Steve because he was one of the shining ones of Earth. I'd known from the start that persuading him to wed a Martian woman would take plenty of doing.

EARTHIANS are funny that way. Love to them is a complex thing, a web that has to be skillfully woven right from the start. Beauty alone isn't enough. You have to say to them: "You'll never hold that woman in your arms. Can't you see how bopeless it is?"

Then the iron goes deep. If a love flies straight in the teeth of despair and comes out all right in the end, it will be as strong as death.

So I'd arranged for Steve to stumble on the mirror, to pick up that two-way televisual circuit into a very special paradise for two. And I'd opposed and warned him just to make sure he'd think of himself as a man facing hopeless odds to win through to an undying love.

On the other side it was easier. Azala had fallen in love with Steve before we put her on the other end of that televisual circuit. But seeing bim wounded and in need of ber had turned it into what Earthians call a great love.

Perhaps Earthians would someday smash the aura that had flamed about the heads of the Martian rulers for fifty thousand years.

I'd done my best to smash it. I had gone simply and humbly among Earthians, seeking a fresh wind to trundle the cinders of a dying culture.

I dreamed of Martians and Earthians standing equal and strong and proud, hands linked in friendship, cemented by bonds of kinship, separated by no gulfs such as now yawned before me, separating me from Steve.

I wanted to shout: "Good luck, Steve, Azala. You're good kids and you deserve the best."

Then I remembered that Steve was nearly forty, not quite a kid by Earthian standards. But, looking at Azala, I was pretty sure that Steve still had his best years ahead of him.

I wanted to go up to him and shake his hand for the last time. But now the hands of my people were tugging at my shoulders, stripping off the Earthian garments I'd worn so long with scant respect for my desire to be as human and regular as the next guy.

They got the suit off, and then I saw the old familiar cloak, purple and billowing out with shimmering star images, and I shuddered a little because I knew I'd never really feel at ease wearing it from that moment on.

They got me into the cloak and they bent down and straightened the stiff imperial folds and I was suddenly bored and deathly weary.

A chill wind from the stars seemed to blow over me, but I stood straight and still, and allowed them to fasten on the cloak the great glowing jewel I'd worn from childhood.

Steve saw me then. He was sitting up very straight, his hand on Azala's tumbled, red-gold hair, and I heard him say: "Holy smoke."

I stared down at the jewel, blazing and shuddering and shivering in the desert air, and I shut my eyes tight, wishing for the first time in my life that it did not proclaim me Tulan Sharm, the Glorious One, Temporal Ruler of the Seven Cities before Whom the Stars Bowed.

by NOEL LOOMIS

Dale Stephenson's finger was just starting to move the button . . .

the BRYD

Being immortal, the Bryd was a very wise and resourceful Thing—but even so, the problem of saving Dale Stephenson was a dilly. So *much* had to be done in one-fourth of a second!

THE BRYD WAS AWAKENED with a rude jolt. It didn't even have time for a mental yawn. Something terrible was going on in Dale Stevenson's mind, and the turmoil there made the Bryd most uncomfortable. It shook off the lethargy of its long sleep. It knew instinctively that Dale Stevenson was about to get in trouble and make his mind unsuitable for the Bryd's occupancy.

The Bryd sighed. These humans were so unstable, so impulsive. The Bryd took a look around.

They — Dale Stevenson and he — were not on Earth. They seemed to be in space somewhere, 5,100 miles from Earth. Well, well, so men finally were breaking the shackles of gravitation. The Bryd became a little more interested.

But Dale Stevenson was reaching for a button that would fire a rocket to position the mirror and burn a path across the

biggest city in Europe. Hey! what was going on here, anyway?

The Bryd had about a quarter of a second to do a lot of research. What was Dale Stevenson doing up here? What had he done with himself in the twenty-four years since the Bryd had curled up in the boy's cozy four-year-old mind and settled down for a long nap?

The Bryd could have stayed Dale's hand for a while, but the Bryd very much believed in minding its own business. It didn't like to interfere with humans; that was policy. So it decided to get busy. It had a quarter of a second to find out things and decide what, if anything, to do about them. Certainly it couldn't expect to stay comfortably in a mind as upset as Dale Stevenson's . . . so it got busy.

THE FIRST THING to do was get oriented. The Bryd took a quick look around. Dale Stevenson, doctor of physics, was in charge of this sun-station, which was a man-made island in space, some three miles in diameter. The rim of the island was composed mainly of a steel framework like the rim of a wheel, with little cabins at various intervals to house a power plant, various controls, rocket berths, repair shops, and living quarters for the sun-station's crew.

The center area of the sun-station was a giant mirror, three miles across, made up of thin sheets of metallic sodium fastened to a skeleton of wire nets. The sodium was very light in weight, and being in airless and heatless space, was inert. Also it was highly reflective.

The whole business was kept at a point approximately 5,100 miles from Earth, where Earth's gravitational attraction approached neutrality and where the entire space-station could be maintained in a given position or moved at will with a minimum expenditure of energy.

Technically the station was owned by Night Sun, Inc., along with nearly a hundred others around Earth, and this particular station, No. 18, was under contract to furnish illumination at night over Paris, France, by staying out of Earth's shadow and reflecting sunlight on Paris during the night.

Management of such a station involved many mathematical factors in distance, triangulation with Paris, velocity and angulation, and control of the curve of the mirror. Normally this was a parabolic curve, but it was constantly varied with other factors to produce the desired degree of illumination.

No. 18 was under the sole control of Dale Stevenson, who had been psych-tested and certified by the United Nations licensing board.

That made the Bryd feel a little better. It looked as if he had made a mistake twenty-four years ago, but it also looked as if the licensing board had been fooled within the last year, for Dale certainly was getting ready to cause a lot of trouble in Paris. He could actuate the controls to expand or contract the rim of the station and thus vary the focal length of the sodium lens, and if he should actually concentrate the sun's rays in a small area, he could draw a flaming path of ruin through the center of Paris.

Reluctantly the Bryd checked again, and found that that was exactly what Dale Stevenson was about to do. The Bryd wondered why. It groaned. Humans were always up to something. Why couldn't they relax so the Bryd could rest?

The Bryd had been so happy back in 2250—or let's see, was it *up* in 2250? (This was 2045.) That was when Bob What's-his-name and that cute girl had landed on Pluto and given him a chance to get away. The long, lonely eons in Pluto's absolute zero had been quite monotonous to the Bryd, which was nothing but pure energy but which certainly had its feelings. After almost a third of a billion years marooned on Pluto it had sometimes almost wished it had not been so adventurous in its youth and hopped that stray comet as it had swept by its home on Arcturus.

For it had tired of the comet and jumped off on Pluto, and then had discovered it didn't have enough range of its own to get from Pluto to another planet. Then it was that Bob and Alys had come along on their 'round-the-system honeymoon, and the Bryd had hitched a ride to Earth (unknown to them), for it was pretty darned lonesome by that time.

It lived very happily with them until they got old, and then it decided to go back in time to 1950. There it found a nice friendly mind in Joe Talbott, and after it saved Joe from blowing up the Lithium Mountain and half the earth with it, it had settled down to snooze in Joe's mind and hadn't awakened until Joe died of old age. Then the Bryd had hunted a nice, stable mind and had finally picked Dale Stevenson, who was four years old, and had curled up for another long, quiet snooze. But now it was only twenty-four years later and Dale was in a bother.

THE BRYD went deeper into Dale's mind to see what was going on. Dale was worried about something. In fact, he had worried so much it had upset his normal mental balance. It seemed to have started back about twenty years ago, a few years after the Bryd had entered Dale's mind.

It seemed that Dale's parents had been killed in an atomic blowup, and Dale, eight years old, had been taken care of by his older sister.

"Don't you worry, Dale," she had told him stoutly. "I'll take good care of you. And I'll buy your clothes and your schoolbooks and everything. You won't have to go to a home. I won't let them take you."

That's what Dale had been scared of —going to a home. He was happy with Marillyn. She took good care of him, and somehow managed to keep the authorities from finding out that a thirteen-year-old girl was supporting a small boy.

Dale had understood all those things later, when he started to the university and they became curious about his background. He realized then what she had done.

"I'll remember all those things," he told her in the first fullness of young maturity and his sudden realization of her loyalty. "You've practically devoted your life to me. I appreciate it. You'll see," he said, embarrassed in this new knowledge, but humbly grateful.

He got a chance to show her; for six months after his graduation, while he was being trained at Station No. 18, he insisted that she should come to visit his new post. Marillyn never had ridden a rocket because she was afraid of them, but she recognized the honor he was conferring on her, for very few persons but employees had ever set foot on a sun-station. She agreed to go. Dale arranged passage. Then she was severely injured in the take-off.

Dale was devastated. He called in specialists, consultants, diagnosticians.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "I'll take care of everything. You'll be all right in no time."

But she wasn't. She was badly crippled, paralyzed from the waist down, and she became pitifully thin.

Dale spent most of his salary on her. Doctors told him it was useless, nothing could help, that a part of her brain cells had been destroyed and could not be rebuilt, that she might live fifty years but she would always be helpless.

Dale refused to believe it. "She's got to get well," he said. "It isn't right—after all the things she did for me. When she was just a kid and should have been skating and dancing and going with boys, she was working to keep me from going to a home. She's entitled to some fun now."

But she didn't have a chance. Her recovery would have been contrary to all medical experience.

DALE'S SALARY grew until he was getting twenty-five hundred a month, but most of it he spent on Marillyn—largely against her wishes.

"Dale, I wish you wouldn't insist on trying every new-fangled cure that comes along. I know what the situation is. I can read. I know I won't get well. I can't. When that brain-tissue is destroyed, it's gone forever. You go out and have some fun. Please."

But Dale, worried but stubborn, said, "Do you remember that winter you sold papers on the street so I could have skates and a sled? Do you think I can forget that?"

"I didn't mean it to become a burden to you," she said softly.

He smiled. "It isn't a burden. I'm doing these things because I want to—because I want to see you active and pretty again. I'll do it, too. You'll see. Next

month you're going to the spa at Carlsbad."

She tried to dissuade him, but next month she was bundled up and carried to the train to go to Prague.

It was in Prague that Dale met Ann Wondra, last daughter of a long line of Polish nobility. Ann was dark-haired, quick-eyed, and she could laugh in a way that warmed a man's blood. At any rate, she warmed Dale Stevenson's.

They went hunting together. They ate dinner together. They rode together. They visited Marillyn together, and after they came away from Marillyn in her wheelchair, Ann said, when he stopped the car on the top of a high hill in the moonlight from where they could see her ancestral castle, "You're determined that she shall get well, aren't you, Dale?"

"Of course," he said.

"What will you do if she doesn't?"

He refused to consider that. "She will," he said confidently.

By that time Dale's arms were tightly around her. So, for that matter, were Ann's around Dale.

"You are quite sure," Ann said cautiously.

"I suppose," he said, in an abrupt humbleness, "it's a fixation by now. It's something I recognize as a problem, and the best way to cure it is to cure Marillyn. When I go out on a party, or when I am extravagant, it nicks my conscience, because Marillyn made all these things possible for me in the first place."

"It isn't your fault that she's an invalid, is it?"

"Not directly, no, although she didn't want to take that trip. However, I don't think it's that as much as it is the feeling that if I get too much interested in other things I might neglect her—that is, I might be somewhere else doing something for fun just at the time when the opportunity would come to get her cured. Do you see what I mean?"

"I think so," she said gently.

"For instance," he went on, very much concerned with making her understand, "if I should spend a lot of money on other things—say, for instance, that I should marry you and we'd build a home and all —that would take a lot of money and it would make me unconsciously less eager to find a cure for Marillyn because deep down I'd know I might not be able to pay for it."

Ann drew back in her arms. Her black eyes reflected the starlight. "Dale, what did you say? Did you say 'if I should marry you'?"

He looked back at her. "Uh-huh."

"You've never even said you loved me."

He kissed her very tenderly on the lips. "I do," he said.

Then they kissed so fiercely that the Bryd, listening in solely to get an angle on this whole business, got excited and very nearly got stuck crosswise in the time-stream.

BUT TWO WEEKS LATER Dale went to his post on sun-station No. 18, and started making Paris days last all night. Six months later he was back for a visit, and Marillyn said, "I'd like to go home, Dale. After all, you've done your part and much more. And this isn't helping me. It's pleasant and all that, but it won't make me walk. I could go to the sanatorium in Florida and it would be just as pleasant and much less expensive. Then you could pursue a normal course of life."

Dale pretended to bristle. "What do you mean by that?"

Marillyn smiled. "Ann is in love with you, Dale. She visits me often, and you should see her eyes sparkle when we mention you. Dale, will you see her tonight?"

"Maybe I will," he said, "but there won't be any marriage until you are well."

"You've been apart six months now," Marillyn said softly. "Maybe if you see her you will change your mind."

Ann would be a wonderful wife. She was much like Marillyn—dark-haired, quick-moving, dignified but warm, affectionate, and loyal. His wife would have to be loyal, of course, like Marillyn. That was essential.

He hired a car that afternoon and drove ont to the castle to surprise Ann. He reached the grounds just before dark, so he parked the car on the hill where Ann

and he had been that last night. Maybe she and he would walk back there later.

He started to walk through the grounds, and when he reached the flower garden it was almost dark. He walked along the cinder-path by the roses, then cut across the grass. He heard murmuring voices, and a moment later he saw Ann walking in the garden. With her was a man, and his arm was around her. The man stopped to snap off a rose. He turned to Ann with a graceful, almost feminine gesture, and she smiled. Then with elaborate and intimate motions he pinned the rose in her hair.

Dale was hurt. He went back quietly to the car. Of course he had not asked her to marry him, but then he had mentioned it—and couldn't she be loyal to his memory? Dale was filled with unexpected jealousy.

After a restless night he had just about rationalized the entire situation. He knew the scene in the garden did not necessarily mean anything. He would phone Ann, mention last night, and of course she would explain. Then he picked up the morning telepaper from London and read in the gossip column that Ann Wondra, the Polish beauty, might soon announce her engagement to Georges Raoul Dumont, son of the French ambassador. Dale was stricken—

And was still in that state of mind, the Bryd saw, when a man came to his hotel room that afternoon. "You are in charge of sun-station No. 18, over Paris, I believe."

This was very interesting to the Bryd, because it saw that the man was cleverly masked with a plastiform shell that did not at all appear to be a mask.

"Yes," Dale said glumly.

THE MAN'S EYES looked speculative. He glanced at the telepaper on Dale's bed, and the Bryd, figuratively speaking—for of course the Byrd was nothing but pure energy—opened its eyes For the Bryd knew the man's thought, and was astonished to learn that Dale had been closely watched for some time. Following the scene in the flower garden, the item in the telepaper had been especially arranged to produce a certain reaction in Dale Stevenson without Ann Wondra's knowledge.

"You know, of course," the man said, "that France is about to disturb world peace by invading Spain."

Dale sat up and frowned. "No, I didn't know it."

"It is true," the man said, watching him intently.

"Why are you telling me?"

The man cleared his throat significantly. "You might be in a position to save the world from an atomic war."

Dale stiffened. "You must know," he said coldly, "what my position is. I am in the employ of the United Nations, and any attempt to control my actions is coercion and the penalty is death."

The man did not back away. He moved closer, and his eyes became black points of force. The Bryd saw that the man had mental powers unusual for that period of Earth's history.

"Look at me, Dale Stevenson."

Dale fought against it, but the man's will was powerful. Dale's resistance weakened. The man's eyes never wavered from Dale's. He moved still closer and spoke in a low tone. "Our information is that France will drop atomic bombs on Spain's principal cities at three a. m. one week from today. Suppose—just suppose—that some other nation—some nation powerful enough to do so—should be in a position to warn France at two-thirty that France would not be permitted to attack. Suppose this warning were backed up with a show of force to prove the warning meant business."

"Isn't that the job of the U. N.?"

The man's face was only inches now from Dale's. The Bryd shivered in its figurative boots. This man was a master hypnotist. Only they wouldn't call him a hypnotist in these days. They'd call him a psyche-man. Psyche-control was much more powerful than hypnosis. Psyche-control touched the moral inhibitions, which hypnosis never had been able to do.

Dale was lost. In the end he agreed, for a cash-on-delivery fee of one hundred thousand dollars, to concentrate his sodi-

um mirror beam on Paris at two-thirty of the morning designated, and thereby, with a smoking path of fire and ruin, help the other nation to warn France that she must keep hands off Spain.

Perhaps Dale's jealously of Georges Raoul Dumont had a bearing on the agreement.

DALE HAD BEEN so much under the foreign agent's influence that be had not considered the ethics of the idea at all until time to press the button that would concentrate the sun-energy into a consuming column of fire. The time was now . . . and it was only now, with the hypnosis just beginning to wear off at the edges, that he found himself wondering vaguely about angles of the situation that previously had not occurred to him.

Who was the man who had talked to him? Whom did he represent? Why hadn't he gone to the U. N. if he knew so much?

But then it was true, as the man had said—if France planned to start dropping atomic bombs at three o'clock, it would be too late to appeal to the U. N. Dale didn't like Frenchmen anyway.

Altogether, the Bryd concluded, Dale Stevenson was pretty muddled up in his mind. The man needed a rest, but that could be worked out later. Right now bis finger was on the firing-button, and the psyche-control, though weakened, was pushing him to finish the job.

Oh dear, these humans certainly could muddle things.

The Bryd decided to have a look at Ann Wondra's mind. And there it got somewhat startled, for Ann's, which previously had been all warm and cozy as toast, was very low indeed. She was looking at a snapshot of Dale, and it wasn't even a very good picture, but it exhilarated ber and at the same time it depressed her, because she wanted Dale but couldn't have him.

Ann was sitting cross-legged on a thick rug, drinking Darjeeling tea, and talking to her mother.

"I'm glad M. Dumont has gone back home," she said, and the Bryd noted that there wasn't any jump in her blood-pressure when she mentioned Georges' name—well, not much, anyway.

"He's very handsome," said her mother, knitting busily. The old lady's blood-pressure jumped more than Ann's.

"But he isn't as nice as Dale Stevenson."

"My sakes, Ann, I hope you don't grow to be an old maid, mooning over that tongue-tied—"

"Mother!" Ann got to her feet. She was long-legged and clean-limbed. The Bryd approved of her. It could imagine by now what she had done to Dale's mind. It didn't see how it had slept through it.

So the Bryd took a quick transition back to America and had a look at the mind of the doctor who took care of Marillyn Stevenson. The physician was having lunch with a consultation expert.

"You know," the doctor said, fingering a Manhattan—"I don't know what to do about young Dale Stevenson. He's still trying to cure his sister."

"Maybe there's a reason."

"Sure there's a reason. He has this feeling of gratitude and loyalty and all. That's all there is to it, but he's butting his head against the infinite inertia. He's spending two thousand a month on that girl—and the worst of it is, she doesn't want him to. She knows what the score is and she's resigned to it."

"Well, loyalty is a wonderful thing, but I suppose it can go too far, and overshadow reason, especially in the young. Is there any chance at all for the girl?"

"No possibility. Progressive degeneration of the brain tissue." He tossed off the Manhattan and the Bryd shuddered—it preferred Martinis, itself. "The only thing would be a miracle, and you know how scarce they are in the medical world." He smiled. They both smiled. The Bryd mentally snorted. Who were they, to laugh at miracles? They thought they were pretty damn' smart, didn't they?

The Bryd decided it had better look in on Marillyn.

IT FOUND HER in a glassed-in porch of the sanatorium, with her reclining chair facing south, and the sun pouring down throngh the magnolias. The Bryd

liked this. Everything was restful and peaceful and pleasant—

But something was wrong as hell in Marillyn's mind.

She had a small bottle of something in one hand under the light blanket, and she was lying back running over everything in her mind. Dale loved Ann and Ann loved Dale. But they couldn't get married because of Dale's exaggerated sense of duty.

Marillyn didn't want to keep them apart. She could adjust herself to a very pleasant life in a place like this, but Dale wouldn't let her. As fast as he could save some money, he'd dream up some new scheme to get her cured.

Well, Marillyn reasoned, she wasn't of any use to anybody. Why should she stay in Dale's way? The Bryd was puzzled. What did she think she could do?

She had the little bottle under the blanket, she was thinking. A few drops of that and—the Bryd was positively flabbergasted. The girl was getting ready to kill herself. The Bryd probed into her mind for an instant and discovered that she wasn't being a martyr and had no complexes; she was just trying to straighten things out for Dale and Ann.

Oh, beans, thought the Bryd. If humans weren't the dumbest beings ever! It watched Marillyn raise the bottle to her lips. It simultaneously took the form of a nurse, standing there at Marillyn's side, and Marillyn gasped and said, "Oh, nurse, I didn't know you were there."

"I am," said the Bryd in its best contralto voice. "Did you wish something, Miss?"

The hand with the bottle of poison fell back under the blanket. "No, I didn't call."

"May I move your chair out of the sun, Miss?"

"It isn't in the sun," Marillyn said.

The Bryd raised its eyebrows. It did some quick work on the wind, and there was the sun, shining steadily through an opening in the magnolia trees.

"Perhaps it *is* too bright," said Marillyn. "If you'd just move it over there—"

The Bryd was delighted. In the process of moving the chair, it got its figurative hands on the bottle and disintegrated it.

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Then it said, "Miss, don't you think you will get well?"

Marillyn said calmly, resignedly, "There's no chance. None whatever. When brain-tissue is gone, there is nothing medical science can do. They can't build tissue, you know."

"Oh?" said the Bryd.

"Only a miracle," said Marillyn. "And miracles don't happen in medical science."

The Bryd almost snorted aloud. Oh, they didn't, hey? It—

The head nurse came striding up, her leather heels clacking on the tile floor. "Miss—" She looked puzzled. "Who are you, anyway?" she demanded. "I've never seen you before."

These women! Maybe the Bryd was getting peevish in its old age, but why couldn't people mind their own business for a change?

It resolved itself into a doctor, and it was gratified to watch the head nurse's eyes shoot open.

"Madam," the Bryd said in its best baritone, "were you addressing me?"

"I—" The head nurse swallowed. "No, sir, I—I beg your pardon, sir." She recovered slightly. "Have I seen you before, sir?"

OH, BOTHER! Details, details! Humans wouldn't be happy if they weren't tied up in details all the time. The Bryd dematerialized and went inside the sanatorium by the simple process of flowing through the spaces around the nuclei of the atoms in the wall. Then, on second thought, it went back and erased some memories from the mind of the head nurse; then it took Marillyn through the wall into the sanatorium. It went into her mind and did some repair work that would have amazed the finest brain surgeons on Earth. In a few months Marillyn's paralysis would be gone and she would be well and happy. Miracles, did they say? Well, they'd asked for it.

The Bryd was somewhat irked with itself for having interfered—but it had been for the best.

It got on a tight beam and went back to sun-station No. 18. Dale Stevenson's finger was just starting to move the button. There was maybe a fiftieth of a second left.

The Bryd carefully implanted the knowledge of Marillyn's cure in a corner of Dale's brain and sat back to await results. But in the next hundredth of a second there was no response. Dale still was about to turn the sun on Paris.

So the Bryd, now thoroughly disgusted, implanted the knowledge of Ann's love in another corner of Dale's mind and then to its astonishment had to jump fast to get out of the way.

Did that ever get results! Dale held his finger. He got up and rubbed his forehead a moment. Then he went to the radiophone. "Get me the U. N. police headquarters in London," he said.

He stood there beating his brains to figure out what had gotten into him, so the Bryd just felt around and erased a few memories, and everything was all right. Then the Bryd climbed into its favorite cozy spot in Dale's mind. The spot was still warm and snuggly. It began to settle down — but then it remembered something.

It got up. It went back to Earth and hunted up the minds of the men who were flying atom-bombs over France. The Bryd knew by now, of course, that France herself had never had any atom-bombs.

The Bryd went into the minds of the foreign fliers and sent them back to drop the atom-bombs on their own cities. After all, they had those bombs and they apparently were the kind who wouldn't be satisfied until they could drop them. The Bryd dusted off its hands and headed wearily for sun-station No. 18. It hoped for many restful years ahead with Dale and Ann.

If it didn't get them, the Bryd thought disgustedly, it had better try to hitch a ride back to Pluto. At least it had had rest and quiet there.

The problem was simple—or rather, simply stated: Zoya Lar-Tul must keep those nasty, aggressive little *Earthmen* from discovering the location of his home-star . . .

OPEN INVITATION

A Short Story by H. B. FYFE

AS ULLO DAH-GOW WADDLED into the section communications chamber on Yaradir, second planet of Zillor, two of his four walking tentacles stuck slightly on a nearly dry spot.

"Fire and dry sand!" he swore at the technicians. "Can't you two even keep the footing decently moist?"

Without waiting for an answer, he made his way to the row of shallow mud tubs before the television screen. The operators aimed eyestalks at each other. Finally,

Yado Nol-Moz, as junior, rose and went to the wall controls of the conditioner.

The assistant supervisor was relieved to see a thin sheet of water creep across the floor. He never knew when Yado or Viri Nol-Rin might choose to ignore him.

Which comes of old Ahnu loading this section with his nephews, he thought bitterly, forgetting that in his own office he already had a list of his own relatives prepared against the day when he should succeed to the post of Supervisor of Colonial Scouting for Sector 63.

The slap-slap of tentacles in the corridor announced the arrival of his superior. Ahnu Nol-Yev entered and lowed his thick body into the choicest of the mud tubs, which Ullo had prudently left free.

"Now, what's this urgent message?" he demanded, pointing one eyestalk at Ullo and fixing the other upon the screen above Viri's broad, bony head.

"A request for orders from scout Zoya Lar-Tul," answered Viri. "Assigned to . . . let me see . . . system LL-255-13."

"Did we have any report on that system?" asked Ahnu.

Yado produced the tape of a preliminary report and placed it on the speaker. The list of facts rolled out: number of planets . . . number with sufficient water for colonization . . . number of intelligent species—one, on third planet . . . native nomenclature—star, *Sol;* own planet, *Earth;* others . . .and so on.

"All right," wheezed Ahnu. "I remember now. Get hold of . . . whatsisname . . . Zoya!"

VIRI manipulated his keys and knobs. The brief delay before an answering image appeared on the screen irritated Ahnu. The loose, coppery scales around his thick neck glinted with iridescent highlights as he puffed out his air-sacs.

"Dessication!" he snarled. "We bridge all those light-years with snbspace waves for his benefit, and he can't be alert enough to—Got him now, Viri?"

The technician snapped the tip of a gripping tentacle in assent. Another Yaradirian looked out at them from the screen.

This one had obviously been roughing it; his scales were lubricated by only a minimum film of moisture, and he wore space harness on the lower part of his body.

To keep his walking tentacles wet, Ullo realized. *He hasn't so much as a drop of water on the floor of that dive!*

"Zoya Lar-Tul!" announced Viri.

"Stated simply," said Ahnu bluntly, "what is your trouble?"

"Stated simply, Great One," answered the scout, "I am in imminent danger of detection by natives of this system."

Ullo stiffened in his mud tub. He heard the *slurp* as the Supervisor splashed more mud upon the oozing floor.

"How is that?" demanded Ahnu, his throat again beginning to expand majestically.

"I fail to see," replied Zoya, "in what manner I could have avoided it, Great One. The natives, *Earthmen* in their own speech, have just discovered an inefficient form of our own interstellar subspace drive. They have gone exploring."

Might have known it, thought Ullo. *Just when I'm working up to a top rank, too!*

It sounded bad. Should they be unable to think Zoya out of his predicament, it might well mean new personnel all around. Ullo's only satisfaction was that Ahnu's relatives would be discharged before his own resignation was given him to sign.

Ahnu controlled himself.

"Give me a picture of your situation!" he commanded.

"To begin with, Great One, I chose to study the natives from a distance, as is usual. I left my subspace ship on the largest satellite of their sixth planet, which has several other moons and a beautiful set of rings that—"

"Kindly touch bottom!" Ahnu cut him off. "I am not interested in a local travelogue!"

"Even so, Great One. With my short-range rocket, I then established this base on the seventh moon of their fifth planet. Only this moon's smallness and insignificance has so far prevented by discovery.

They listened to the rest of the story in an uncomfortable silence that was broken only by an occasional squishing of mud

as one or another stirred uneasily.

Zoya Lar-Tul had observed the *Earthmen*, as well as other bodies in the system, for a quarter-revolution of his chosen fifth planet. At the time of his arrival, the natives had reached their own satellite, but he judged that they would be long in organizing successful flights to the planets.

"I translated some of their broadcasts and learned that this was their great current project. Naturally, however, I was unconcerned, and contented myself with obtaining specimens for my researches by brief, discreet trips here and there."

ULLO snapped his tentacle tip quietly in assent. He remembered from his history the dreadfully long period of his own race's expansion throughout the system of Zillor. These *Earthmen*, however, seemed from Zoya's report to possess certain advantages. Their requirements of air and water were moderate and more easily stored in a space vessel. If they *had* discovered a form of subspace drive, they might be energetic enough to pop up in the vicinity of Zillor some fine day.

"You will imagine my amazement," continued Zoya, "when I heard one of their broadcasts announce that a ship had reached their fourth planet, and another the second—"

Ahnu blew out a long, bubbling breath.

"All this is doubtless interesting," he snorted, "but what is the immediate emergency?"

The image of Zoya aimed both eyestalks rather deliberately at the Supervisor.

"They reached and passed this group of satellites," he hissed out. "Do I make clear my dilemma, Great One?"

He waited while Ahnu's neck swelled dangerously. Just before the explosion, he continued:

"Should they discover me, they will also find the specimens I have collected, except the choicer ones stored on my subspace vessel for transport home. This is what I mean—"

Zoya reached out to touch a button, and the scene changed to what was evidently the dissecting laboratory of his base. Behind a transparent bulkhead hung several sorts of carcasses in various stages of dismemberment. Ullo suspected that the storeroom was simply left at the temperature of the moon's surface.

"Very well!" exclaimed Ahnu as the scout reappeared. "You seem to be operating a sort of butcher shop with some of the most ugly specimens ever seen. What about it?"

Ullo felt sorry for the scout. Even he—indeed, as he saw by the twitch of their eyestalks, even the technicians—had realized the problem. Zoya patiently explained, forbearing to mention that his instructions were laid out by Ahnu.

"If you will refer to descriptions in my preliminary report, Great One, you will see that certain of the specimens are *Earthmen* themselves. Should their explorers discover them, I have reason to believe they would be resentful. It is my opinion that they are a belligerent race."

Ahnu was silent for a moment.

"Well . . . yes . . . that is possible," he admitted.

"It would appear," he continued in another moment, "that you must either abandon your base or dispose of your specimens if, as you say, the *Earthmen* have so soon reached your vicinity"

Zoya waited. Ullo stirred in his tub.

"If I may suggest, Great One—?"

"Yes?"

"I believe he should destroy his subspace ship!"

"*What!*"

"I am inclined to agree," Zoya Lar-Tul put in.

AMAZED, Ahnu waited for Ullo's reasons. Encouraged by such consideration, the latter went on.

"If these *Earthmen* are already on their way to the ringed planet, they will undoubtedly stop first at the largest moon—where Zoya has left his main ship."

"And will likely discover it there," Ahnu agreed reluctantly.

"And from that point," continued Ullo, "they will discover both our location in space and the interstellar subspace drive

in its finished form. After that, they can get at *us!*"

"The opposite extreme of my dilemma," confirmed Zoya.

"Silence!" ordered Ahnu. "Let me think!"

All of them—Supervisor, assistant, technicians, and the image on the screen—considered the situation gloomily. The government of Yaradir would take a dry view of having to combat an invasion, should one develop from this. The race of Yaradir, because of their personal requirements and life conditions, were not as numerous as most of the races they had found in their explorations. The great distances between their colonies and the growing number of these were due to the comparative rarity of the type of planet that suited them.

"Can you reach the ship in your local rocket in time to escape in it?" asked Ahnu. "After all, subspace ships are costly; if we leave a deserted base, what can they find out?"

"It is possible," admitted Zoya doubtfully, "but risky."

"What do you mean?"

"They may intercept me on the way, for their ships are faster than my rocket. They may even catch the big ship before I gain enough speed to shift into subspace drive."

"For all we know," interrupted Ullo, forgetting his place, "they may be able to keep up with you even then."

Ahnu bubbled angrily at the idea, but they all were silent for another unhappy period of cogitation.

"Perhaps," admitted Ahnu in the end, "you will have to destroy the subspace ship, but only in the last extremity!"

"I could blow it up from space, if I get within range."

"Not so fast; that ship is a major item in the budget!" Ahnu told him angrily. "The first thing is to try to get aboard unseen and return to pick up what you can from your base."

"And if these *Earthmen* are nearby?" Ullo asked.

"Then Zoya must forget the base and escape with the ship, which is the main thing."

"But if they have already found it?" inquired Zoya.

"All right, all right! *Then* destroy it! And you had better start immediately unless you wish to find such action necessary. Somehow,"—here one eyestalk was deflected rather pointedly toward Ullo—"somehow, too many mouths always speed up the clocks."

Ullo did a little neck-swelling himself at this example of bias.

Just because he couldn't get my job for his youngest brother, he thought resentfully. *Serve him right if I'd resigned! Where'd he be if I didn't stick here to push his snout into the obvious every time he slides over it?*

"Yes," repeated Ahnu, complacent at having found his solution, "that is what you must do. If anything goes wrong, you can still use your rocket to return to your base."

"Which I hope," sighed Zoya, "to find undisturbed."

AT THAT, Ahnu fell silent. After a tense moment, he heaved himself around to direct both eyestalks at Ullo.

"Well?" he wheezed. "Have you no suggestions in case he does have to destroy the subspace ship?"

Ullo twirled one tentacle tip in the mud of his tub until he collected a sticky blob. This he flipped away with a snap of the tentacle. He derived a slight satisfaction from the *splat* against the far wall.

"We must try to preserve *one* of his collections of information," he said. "It would entail considerable expense—not to mention time—to replace Zoya and repeat the scouting."

Ahnu shifted his position irritably. Ullo saw that his reference to expense had been a shrewd blow. The Supervisor snorted and bubbled, but finally conceded that much and gestured for Ullo to continue.

"So it would be unfortunate if he should succeed in regaining his big ship, only to return to his base and find it occupied by exploring *Earthmen.*"

"What do you suggest, then?"

"He should try for *either* the base or

the ship, and arrange to destroy the other! If he can remain undetected for a short time at the base, he can dispose of his specimens after forwarding a report on them. If he gets to the ship safely, why leave behind any clues at all?"

After considerable wheezing and puffing, it was agreed that Zoya should take a chance on having his base discovered while he was away, but provide for the eventuality by arranging a bomb that would be set off by the approach of any strange ship. He admitted that he already had one, keyed to be safe only after certain signals from his own rocket. He had only to hook it up.

"If you do have to return," advised Ullo, "clean out your dissecting room and then make friends with the *Earthmen.* Give them some story of being cast away, and ask help in building a new ship."

"You mean . . . install our kind of drive without their knowing?"

"Exactly!" said Ahnu, taking to the idea. "Then just drop out of sight some fine day and leave them wondering which way you went."

At this point, Viri made bold to request that Zoya leave the televisor at the base operating, with a continuous view of the main chamber as now shown. He began to explain that he wanted to be sure not to lose contact, but Ahnu had heard enough. He cut Viri short by climbing out of his mud tub.

"That settles it then," he summed up to Zoya. "If you *are* forced to destroy the subspace ship, report from the base when you return and are ready to contact the natives. Otherwise, report from the ship!"

He waddled out of the communications chamber without ceremony, followed by Ullo Dah-Gow.

THE NEXT DAY, the latter was kept busy with the many reports of arid planets he had to file in order to justify the expenses of exploration.

He always leaves explaining the budget to me, he thought.

He did, however, snatch time to put a copy tape of the last installment of Zoya's preliminary report on the speaker, having felt ill at ease for not being completely up to date at the previous evening's conference.

Halfway through a listing of sociological and psychological observations, Ullo stiffened. He ran the tape through again.

"He'd *better* get to that ship!" he wheezed to himself. "They sound like a nest of trouble-makers—resourceful, aggressive, just the sort to burst into this system some sweet day and tell us Yaradir is *their* colony!"

He ripped the tape out of the speaker and hurried along a dank corridor to Ahnu's office, not even pausing at his favorite spots to rub against the cool, dripping walls. He found his chief relaxing in an adjoining chamber by submitting to a massage.

"Not now!" complained Ahnu at the first mention of *Earthmen.* "Wait till we hear from Zoya. I want to enjoy having my scales oiled in peace!"

Ullo spitefully dropped the tape into a pot of scale-grease on the way out, but dutifully returned to his work.

Late one night, however, he was reminded of the scout in system LL-255-13. The emergency buzzer beside his sleeping pool awoke him with an urgent summons. The number on the screen beside it indicated the communications chamber now reserved for Zoya Lar-Tul.

Still dripping, Ullo pumped down the corridor, encountering his chief at the last turn. Ahnu was irritated.

"What can they have spoiled now?" he demanded, as if he suspected Ullo of having had a tentacle in it. "It was a perfectly simple arrangement!"

"Perhaps something unexpected came up," suggested Ullo.

"What could be unexpected? It was utterly simple!" said Ahnu explosively. "If he beats them to it, he reports from the ship. Otherwise he destroys it and goes back to report from his base!"

He slap-slapped irately into their destination, wondering audibly why he had to come down here and direct people's eyestalks for them.

"Because, Great One," replied Viri Nol-Rin, a trifle more abruptly than was con-

sistent with proper respect for Ahnu's position, "the televisor at Zoya's base has gone dead!"

"What? Why? If you can't keep in communication—"

"There *isn't* any communication," interrupted Viri.

Ullo saw that the operator was deeply disturbed. To interrupt—*actually interrupt*—Ahnu Nol-Yev! Even if one was his nephew!

"That is why, if you will remember," Viri went on, "I insisted Zoya leave his signal in operation. The chance that his base would be approached by a strange ship sooner than we hoped, and blow up."

"So the bomb went off?" said Ullo.

"It must have. And, by the figures Zoya gave me before he left, he is long, long overdue at the subspace ship."

"Well, what of it?" demanded Ahnu. "It merely means he will have to report from the ship when he . . . if he . . . if *they* don't—"

He snorted and wheezed into silence.

ULLO traded stares with Viri. Then he looked at Yado, who wore an equally unhappy expression on his wide visage.

"Are you *sure* he would have reached the ship before now?" Ahnu demanded.

"Completely."

The Supervisor swore feelingly, using some of the bleakest and driest terms Ullo had ever heard. The gist of the diatribe was the delay and expense.

"Now it may be yaras before we get his data!"

"How do you mean?" asked Ullo.

"It's obvious, isn't it? He must have had to destroy the ship; but before he got back, some prowling *Earthmen* set off the charge at his base. That leaves him with only his rocket. Don't you see what it means?"

"Perhaps not," said Ullo.

"Why, he'll have to make friends with those *things* from *Earth*, and get help building a new ship. Until then, we'll have to classify his report 'pending.'"

He sloshed watery mud about as he heaved himself from his tub impatiently. Ullo aimed an eyestalk at each of the technicians, keeping them silent until Ahnu had waddled indignantly from the room.

"I *knew* we didn't cover all the alternatives that night!" said Ullo feelingly. "How could we be so dry inside the skull? How *could* we?"

"He certainly doesn't like the delay," commented Yado.

"Delay!" snorted Ullo. Then he asked, "Is that what it means to you, too?"

Viri and Yado fidgeted under his stare.

"I keep wondering if Zoya reached the ship," said Ullo.

They stared at him.

"Say it this way, then: 'If *Zoya* reached the ship?'"

Viri sighed.

"I suppose we may never find out what really happened," he said.

"I believe I would really rather *not*," Ullo told them, preparing to leave. "Listen in to a complete copy of the preliminary report Zoya sent, and you will see what I mean."

His scales were too dry and needed an oiling, he told himself; but he knew it was more than that which sent the shudder through him. And there were *billions* of them!

"What shall we do?" asked Viri.

"I don't know what good it will do," said Ullo, pausing in the doorway, "but you might make your wills. Personally, I intend to apply for transfer to some colony lying in the opposite direction from this *Sol*. Record of us, and a ship to reach us—we might as well have sent them an invitation!"

HE REMEMBERED their unhappy eyes two yaras later, when the regular bulletin tapes sent out to the colonies reported Ahnu's dismissal. Ullo applied for a post at a more distant colony.

After one yara at the new post, the monthly tapes from Yaradir were interrupted. Everybody complained about the service.

Everybody but Ullo.

He commandeered a subspace ship, and moved on.

But not . . . far . . . enough. . . .

It was the story behind the biggest story on Mars—how Fate had grimly reckoned with the Rockhead Rastol—but Scott Warren of Galactic News couldn't write it . . . yet.

"No!" screamed Rastol. "It's not true . . . it's a lie!"

dateline: MARS

by RICHARD WILSON

SCOTT WARREN SNAPPED off the vision screen and sat down in front of his typewriter. Through the glass side of the building he could see the lights of the celebrations whose sounds he had just silenced. He lighted a cigarette and started to type out the final edition of *Today on Mars* for transmission by Interradio to the New York bureau of the Galactic News Service. He started the news roundup:

"IOPA, MARS—(GN)—Events on Mars were at a snailspace today, the midpoint of the traditional three-day Landing Day holiday . . ."

Scott rolled the paper up in the carriage of his typewriter and jagged a line through what he had written. Four "days" in the same sentence might get past the night desk, but the New York bureau

chief would send him a memo about it in the morning.

He started again,

" . . . Landing Day celebrations on Mars are at their midpoint tonight, with both Earth people and natives . . ."

He x'ed out "natives" and substituted "Martians," remembering the memo he'd got about *that.*

" . . . both Earth people and Martians forgetting their political and physical differences to take part in planetwide carnivals. Business houses, government offices and stores have been closed down since Friday, and Pleasure is king. The two great cities on Mars—Iopa and Senalla—are ablaze with light, from their desert outskirts to the quarter-mile-high government buildings that mark the center of each. Parades, speeches . . ."

Scott snubbed out his cigarette, shoved his chair away from the desk. He looked out over Iopa toward the government building, spotted in searchlight rays from all sides of the city. It was bad enough writing this stuff—bad enough grinding out a routine night lead, to be later dictated to Interradio for transmission across space to Earth, simply because the news schedule demanded two daily Mars round-ups—

But it wasn't even the truth.

THE TRUTH was that both Earth people and Martians were observing Landing Day with the usual fuss—but that it was all a big masquerade. The oldtime distrust of Terrestrials that had come with the first spaceship was still there. It had never been completely wiped out. The only ones being taken in were the people back home, who knew nothing about Mars except what they were told by people like Scott Warren, and who usually saw it only as a red pinpoint in the sky, if the weather happened to be right.

When he got to thinking this way, Scott Warren felt more like a propagandist for World Government than a newsman—the chief of the Mars bureau of Galactic News. He wished he could tell them the truth, a truth not dictated by Policy. Some day he'd write a book. That was what all newsmen said, wasn't it? The truth would have gone something like this:

"The distrust Martians have for Earth people — yes, that includes you, dear friends of the reading, listening and viewing audience—wasn't completely wiped out even when World Government corrected its first monumental blunder. Oh, yes, W.G. has made blunders, and the first was a whooperdoo, ladies, gentlemen and prodigies, a whooperdoo of the first order, a dilly whose details still are skirted when we talk about it, because they're very, very embarrassing.

"The first spaceship, you see, dealt naturally enough with those who had seemed to be the rulers of Mars, if not the duly elected representatives of the pee-pul. And so did the Earth emissaries who followed. These Martians in the welcoming party were a crafty race, stockily built with oversized heads like granite, hard-bargaining and double-crossing. Rockheads, we called them, and still do, underestimating them.

"As our politicians point out with pride, there has been no colonization of Mars—as such. Not even despite the cries of the imperialists back home. And there has been no war, you will remember, although for a while it was touch and go.

"Among the first to come from Earth were the World Government commissions. C.E.A.—exploration and assessment. C.E.D.—economic development. C.I.I.—industrial integration. C.H.W. came later—health and welfare. And so did C.I.E.—information and education.

"It all worked very smoothly. Mars, you remember, was the goal of space-flight for half a century, ever since the pioneer hop to the icy rock of the moon; and the planning commission had it all set up, in advance, from Martian Relations right down to War Planning (top secret in the "if necessary" category).

"But Earth muffed it, and good. The Rockheads of Mars who met the spaceship, and whose delegations worked with the Earth emissaries, were intelligent people, true——but they were the fascists of Mars. What World Government didn't know, and couldn't have known, was that there had been a military revolution on the red planet a short ten years before the first spaceship landed, and that in that

revolution the democratic government of the planet was overthrown and its leaders killed or banished!"

SCOTT WARREN took an imaginary sip of water and paced up and down his imaginary lecture platform. He pointed a finger at his imaginary classroom.

The big shots of W.G. had found out about it, of course. It didn't take them too long. Only about two years went by before they were convinced of what had happened, and they had had suspicion of it long before. But it took W.G. twenty years to do anything about it. Twenty years, mind you, when the average lifespan of a Martian is forty.

Of course there were reasons. Good, sound, diplomatic reasons. In the first place, it would have been embarrassing to act sooner. There had been such hoopla and ballyhoo during the first negotiations with the Rockheads, so many grandiose statements and telepix of interplanetary amity, that to have confessed then would have been diplomatic suicide—or so they thought. So the fiction had been maintained. Not only maintained, but magnified and distorted.

So bad did the distortion become that the people back home had almost no inkling of the difficulties in negotiation, of the many concessions Earth had to make to Mars' totalitarian rulers. They didn't know how many insults the Earth envoys had to swallow, or of the innumerable conferences that ended in deadlock because of the Rockheads' impossible demands—demands made to impress their own subject people with their might—or of the W.G. investigators who were imprisoned because they had stumbled across some particularly noisome secret of the corrupt Martian government.

Scott was getting quite wound up. He was pointing a finger again when the door opened. His finger paralyzed in midair.

The thing that entered was taller than he. The entire upper half of it was a face. An idiotically-grinning, white-toothed face. Its eyes were outlined in black and its lips were an oversized red. A caricature of a woman's face, with a great mass of blonde hair coiled fantastically above.

"What the hell," said Scott.

The figure bent forward, and the huge mask came off.

"Hello, Scott," a girl said.

"My Terrestrial aunt," said Scott. "Ylia."

She was a Martian, the daughter of one of the subcommissioners of her government. Ylia wasn't pretty by any Earth standard. She had the big head of her race, the stocky body and the flat face. But she was esteemed by the Martians as attractive, as far as looks count on that planet.

"Why the mask?" asked Scott. "I didn't think you went in for all this brothers-together nonsense."

"Everybody's masked tonight," she said, meaning all the women. "I had to see you, and I thought I'd attract less attention if I wore one, too."

Scott knew what the masks represented. They were brought out every Landing Day and worn in the streets for the traditional celebrations. The masks were all of women—Earth women. Few Earth women had come to Mars, but Earth's advertising had come as soon as the planet was opened to trade. And with the ads had come the art which hadn't changed in centuries. A pretty face, it was reasoned—if there was any reasoning—ought to sell as much soap or cigarettes on Mars as it had on Earth. Hence the masks, representing Earth's greatest contribution thus far to the culture of its neighboring planet—advertising and the female face.

"What's up, Ylia?" Scott asked.

"We're having a meeting, sort of, and Father would like you to come, if you can."

"Why sure," he said. "When is it?"

"Anytime you get there. You see, you're sort of part of it."

"Will there be anything I can use in the roundup?" Scott asked. "There's nothing in it so far except color stuff on Landing Day. It has to go off in a few hours."

"You're the newsman," Ylia said. "Why not come and see?"

"Good enough," he said.

"There's something Father would like you to bring with you."

"I don't usually carry a gun," said

Scott, "but I guess I could scrounge one up if I had to."

"Nothing like that. I think you have what he needs right in your files. The Green Arrow affair. You do have it, don't you?"

"Of course. We have copies of all the stories on it that Galactic sent out. I can dig them up in a couple of minutes."

"No," said Ylia. "Not that part of it. What we want is the information you didn't send out."

"Oh?" said Scott.

THE GREEN ARROW was the name the news services had given a guerrilla leader who'd spearheaded the resistance movement against the Rockheads before World Government had got around to any definite action. The name came from a chalk symbol he had left behind him after each raid or foray. Around the Green Arrow had rallied a handful of partisans who had not been content with W.G.'s slow and not-so-sure methods of deposing the Rockhead regime. They were men of ideals and, more than that, of action. Somewhere in the desert below Syrtis had been the Arrow's headquarters. All the punitive expeditions of the Rockheads had failed to find him. No one had known who he was. On the rare occasions that an Arrow man was captured, no amount of torture could get a single secret from him.

The damage the Green Arrow did to the Rockheads was negligible in its overall effect. But he had been more than a night raider—he'd been a symbol to the people in the Rockhead yoke that someone was actively on their side. There was a tremendous lift in spirit each time the Arrow hit a Rockhead target, and for days thereafter people in the community where he had struck—and in *others*, too—were more cocky and less cooperative than the Rockheads thought they had a right to be. The Arrow's raids sparked slowdown movements and some sabotage and evoked Rockhead reprisals, against guilty and innocent alike. Some of the reprisals were cruel—so cruel that they would have deterred a less determined man—but the Green Arrow was not to be swayed. He remained—even after he was captured and executed—a symbol of liberty in a land which had not tasted such a blessing for years.

Galactic News had covered the Green Arrow story from start to finish. G.N. gave it the full treatment, despite threats from the Rockheads and the denial to it of certain newsgathering facilities. More than that, Scott Warren got permission from G.N.'s New York headquarters to send a man out to interview the Arrow The reporter got through where all the anti-partisan forces of the Rockheads had failed, and interviewed the Arrow in his desert headquarters. That interview was the journalistic beat of the year—and was highly embarrassing to the Rockheads. Shortly thereafter the reporter was arrested by the Rockhead secret police, and it took all the influence of World Government to have him released. The name of that reporter was George Mercer. He was now covering the Martian parliament for Galactic News.

There had been more in Mercer's story than had been made public, however. Before Galactic broke the story, it went with it to W.G. A high diplomatic official there, in the interests of security, asked G.N. to withhold one fact, and Galactic agreed. As things turned out it was nothing W.G. hadn't known; but something in the nature of a politico-military secret. It was the name of the Green Arrow.

SCOTT WARREN knew what the name was, but it meant nothing to him. He got Mercer's original story out of the files—it had once been kept in a safe—and put it in an inside pocket.

"This used to be classified material," he said to the girl. "It's not any more. I don't know why you want it."

Ylia smiled. "Are you ready to go?"

He nodded. She put the grotesque mask on again and the two of them left the building.

Ylia's father was Kring, a sub-commissioner of commerce in the government of President Murain. (The news services had begun the custom of transliterating Martian names into pronounceable English, the W.G. language, and W.G. itself *later* adopted it.) Murain was a symbol of

World Government's diplomatic triumph, as Earth chose to regard it. For two decades the dirty political game of collaboration with the Rockheads had been played —although it was on such a high level that diplomacy was considered the proper word. It ended, finally, with free elections —the first since the military coup.

The elections were the result of W.G.'s long psychological siege against the Rockheads. The men from Earth played on the vanity of the complacent dictators until they believed they could be the people's choice voluntarily. It was a masterpiece, Scott had to admit—but a masterpiece of striped-pants double-cross. On the one hand the Earthmen pumped up the egos of the Rockheads, and on the other they smuggled the democratic leaders— those who still lived—out of their desert Siberias and let them talk to the people in thousands of small indoor gatherings.

The people anywhere—whether it's in Iopa or Middletown—are smart if they have the facts. These people went to the polls and booted the Rockheads out. It was close, and there was some violence when W.G. watchers arrested repeaters from the Rockheads' machine, but the dictatorship went down in a relatively peaceful manner. The democratic coup evoked a singing story from Scott Warren, who was then newly-assigned to the post of Mars bureau chief. The story won him a journalistic prize.

The election also provoked a counter-revolution by the Rockheads, which had to be put down by World Government's police troops. That was another story, and it won Scott a rest leave on Earth—which he cut short to get back to the news beat which he found, strangely, he had an unaccountable hankering for.

And so democratic government returned to Mars and everything was dandy—for a while.

SCOTT AND YLIA pushed their way through the celebrating crowds. The big, grinning masks of Earth women were moving chaotically, idiotically, all around them. Spotlights which were partly heat-lamps played over the throng in their many colors, coloring and warming the night scene. Musicians in outlandish costumes circulated in groups of three or four, their reedy tunes conflicting and yet mingling in a pleasing semi-harmony.

Most of the crowds were Martians, but here and there a party of Earth people was taking part in the gaiety. In the warm glow of one big spotlight, an Earthman was dancing with a Martian girl, her mask and his fantastic steps parodying a popular Terrestrial ballroom team.

Suddenly there was an intrusion into this scene of celebration. From a side street into the main square which Scott and Ylia were now going through there came a knot of people. They came on slowly, about a dozen of them, their steady progress in contrast to the aimless, carefree motions of the rest. Their faces were serious, and the group held both Martians and Earthmen. They were young-old faces, young in age but old in their apparent contempt for the scene all round them. The group remained close together, not costumed, and when a reveler pulled at the sleeve of one in invitation to join a chain dance, he was pushed away brusquely, almost angrily. When the group reached a well-lighted position near the center of the square, its members formed themselves into a tight circle. They pulled signs from beneath their tunics and thrust them up, then began moving in a shuffling lockstep, chanting discordantly. They were pickets—serious, almost fanatic young men of two planets, bound together in their cause. Their signs read: "Down with the Earth Imperialists," "Democracy, Not Mockery," "What are you Celebrating—Colonization?" and so on.

They chanted the same things, out of unison, so that their voices created a nerve-tingling atmosphere of unrest. They shouted defiantly, yet not looking anywhere but at the neck of the man directly ahead in the revolving picket line. "Reds Picket Landing Day Fete," Scott said to himself, thinking in headline terms.

There was tension now among the celebrants in this part of the square. This was not a time for problems, or for thinking about them, and those who had gathered to have fun were being robbed of their spree.

Abruptly a Martian stepped up and in a quick motion wrested a sign from one of the pickets. He ripped it up and danced on the pieces. The picket whose sign had been snatched made no protest, aside from a look of surprise and a frown. He stayed in ranks, and the circle continued to go round.

Cheers went up and other revelers pressed forward. The marchers tightened their ranks and took firmer grips on their signs. The Martian who had snatched the first was now conferring with others. He motioned to a group of silently-standing musicians, and they took up a tune. The music was rousing and patriotic, and some costumed Martians went into a wild snake dance. With apparent good humor, but with telling effect, they drove into the circle of pickets and split them into two groups. In the scramble, several more signs were trampled underfoot. More revelers joined the attack and the pickets were split again, until they were widely separated and all their signs were gone. Their unity lost, they disappeared in the crowd.

The musicians switched to a gayer tune and there were cheers and laughter. The Martian who had grabbed down the first sign was hoisted into the air, where he bowed his over sized head, grinning.

The interruption of the fun was ended, and without violence. Scott and Ylia moved on.

BUT SCOTT knew the picketing had been only one manifestation of a smoldering problem. There was truth in those signs, and the people knew it. They just hadn't wanted to be reminded of it now. And, besides, most of them didn't want their thinking done for them by the left-wingers, who proclaimed the right of the people but too often in history had aborted the very rights they spoke of so feelingly.

The limited democracy the people now enjoyed had been hard-won. It was not perfect, they knew, and they suspected that there was corruption here and there, either in their own government or in W.G. But the Martian people had had a bellyful of violence. The force used by the Rockheads, just lately overthrown in a peaceful election, was fresh in their minds, and they were willing to go along for a while with President Murain—at least to give him a chance.

They trusted Murain. He was one of them. But Scott was aware that Murain himself was too trusting. The Martian president was a grateful man, and his gratitude had made him less suspicious than a politician should be.

Where the Rockheads had driven hard bargains with Earth, Murain's representatives drove none at all. They trusted their deliverers—the men of W.G.—to do the right thing. And the Earthmen, some of them, were doing the right thing—but for themselves.

Where the Martian democratic government had once lost to the fascists through force, it was now losing to friends who were rooking it, in a perfectly legitimate, businesslike way. The Commission on Exploration and Assessment had now become known off the record as A. & E.—assessment and exploitation. The business and industries which should have made the Martians prosper—which should have given them the schools and housing they had been robbed of by the Rockheads—these had their profits skimmed off and sent to Earth. The Martians had their freedom now, true, but they couldn't eat it or build with it.

Ylia pulled at Scott's sleeve. They turned down a side street and, at an old stone house that seemed as ancient as Mars itself, she led him through an archway and into a court. She knocked at a door, and, when it opened, took off her ridiculons mask and entered, beckoning Scott to follow.

THEY ENTERED a room that was low and wide, furnished with a mixture of Earth and Mars styles, including some of those chairs which are geared to Martian dimensions—oversized headrest and, between closely-spaced arms, a seat that a plump Terrestrial either had to squeeze into, or avoid.

Of the three people in the room, Scott recognized two: Kring, Ylia's father, and Toby Black, a W.G. investigator whose real job was known to only a few and who

posed as a sales manager for a construction firm. The guise enabled him to be places where the presence of a W.G. representative would be unwelcome. Here, possibly. The other Martian in the room looked familiar, but Scott couldn't place him.

Scott shook hands with Kring and let himself be introduced to Toby, although they'd had many a drink together in the Press Club bar and in less respectable places.

"And this is Mr. Rastol," Kring said of the familiar-looking Martian.

Then Scott remembered. Two days ago President Murain had decided on a man to fill the job of commerce minister in the Martian government, a post vacated through the death of a cabinet member. Murain had offered the job to Rastol. Scott had no idea what had prompted the offer. He felt sure that Murain hadn't acted of his own free choice; pressure must have been brought on him. Apparently it was a concession he felt it necessary to make—a sort of horse trade with some powerful leader in Parliament to get an administration bill through. All Scott knew, now that he remembered, was that Rastol was a Rockhead. Not an overt one, true. There was no blood on his hands, as far as anyone could prove. But Rastol had been a power in the totalitarian government lately voted out. Possiblv Murain could find no one else for the job. Rastol had ability, of course, but he also had a tinge, if not a definite odor.

He had been brought to trial, under a W.G. indictment, but had been acquitted of complicity in any of the really unsavory doings of the Rockhead regime. Some had said it was lack of evidence, but newsmen covering the trial had a strong suspicion that several prosecution witnesses had been given bank accounts. And Rastol went free.

And now Murain was offering him the big commerce job—one that held the purse strings of a fair share of the Martian budget. The post would give Rastol the power to spend, to let contracts, to make loans and parcel out a tremendous amount of business. That money could go to help the economy of Mars back on its feet, or it could be pork-barreled into the coffers of firms whose ties with the Rockheads had been only nominally broken.

Rastol's acceptance of the job, not yet forthcoming, and his confirmation in it by Parliament, would be a kick in the teeth to Martian democracy. The reason for this off-in-the-corner Landing Day soiree became a little clearer — although Scott still was unable to figure out why he'd been invited.

Scott shook the hand Rastol extended and said something noncommittal. Most Martians looked almost alike to Earth's eyes, except for their sex differences, but Rastol was distinctive. He was corpulent, a thing most Martians were not, and he was hairless, which also was unusual. His skin was whiter than that of most of his planetmen, and he had no neck to speak of. If Scott had been a caricaturist, he'd have drawn Rastol as an egg.

Ylia had left the room. She came back now with a tray, and served drinks. Scott took one of the small pottery cups and told himself he mustn't drink more than two of them. They contained a syrupy blue liquid with the kick of a rocket-exhaust.

Kring raised his cup. "To the Republic," he said. They all sipped their drinks.

"I've asked you here," Kring said, "for a purpose. I should not have chosen Landing Day if it had not been important. Some of you have very generously broken other engagements or left your work—" he bowed to Scott—"to be here."

Rastol spoke in a low, resonant voice. "It is an honor to be asked to your home, Mr. Kring."

The "mister" was something Earthmen had brought. Mars, before the Rockheads set up their semi-feudal system, had had no such term of address.

Kring bowed again. "I am especially happy that you were able to come, Mr. Rastol, because what I have to say should be of particular interest to you." He turned to Toby Black. "You, Mr. Black, are interested in construction, of conrse, and Mr. Warren's news service has an interest in something similar—reconstruc-

tion. So we are well met."

Scott didn't know what this preamble was leading to, but he wished Kring would get on with it. He did.

"Mr. Warren," Kring went on, "may also have a news story of some value. You see, before Mr. Rastol leaves this room tonight, he will have announced that he cannot accept the post of minister of commerce in the Murain government."

RASTOL DIDN'T MOVE, except for a narrowing of his eyes. Then he said, carefully: "Indeed?"

Kring smiled a little. "Yes," he said. "I think Mr. Rastol will find that his private affairs are of such a demanding nature that he will be forced regretfully to decline the honor tendered by President Murain."

Rastol said evenly: "I hesitate to differ with my gracious host, but it would seem to me that an individual might be considered to know his own affairs better than another."

"I am sure," said Kring, "that no one knows your affairs better than you, Mr. Rastol."

Scott looked at Toby Black, who had leaned forward in his chair as if trying to see the significance of it all. Scott knew that Toby knew as much about Rastol as anyone, and probably more. Toby was one of half a dozen men who were permitted to ride the private elevator to the private office of the director-general of World Government.

Rastol looked at a timepiece on the wall and rose from his chair. "I am afraid I must say good night. I had hoped to be better company, but I have just remembered an appointment."

"Please sit down, Mr. Rastol," said Kring. "We have much more to discuss."

Rastol moved toward the door. Ylia stepped in front of it. She had a Q-gun in her hand.

"I am quite proud of my daughter's marksmanship," said Kring. "She is the equal of any soldier at hitting a target. At short range she never misses by so much as a hair."

Rastol sat down.

He sipped his drink and appeared to relax. "Be good enough to tell me," he said, "why you think I would be so lacking in a sense of public duty as to reject an assignment to which my government has called me."

"The answer is simple," said Kring. "The Murain government is not your government. Your allegiance is to the totalitarian movement."

"I think the public record will show the falsehood of that statement," said Rastol. "The trial to which I was so cruelly subjected proved just the opposite. You will recall that the verdict was one of acquittal."

"Only," said Kring, "because some witnesses were bribed—and others were murdered."

Rastol smiled thinly. "Your proof?"

Kring smiled also. "Of that? None, I admit. But we have proof of other things—things without value in a court of law, perhaps, but which may persuade you to retire to private life, for your tranquillity of mind."

"Produce them," said Rastol.

He was a cool one, Scott had to admit. Then the newsman realized that Kring was looking at him.

"Mr. Warren," he said, "if you will be so kind." And he held out his hand.

Scott gave him the papers he had brought from the office. He had no idea what bearing they had on the situation now being unfolded.

Kring broke the seal on the envelope and opened it. He looked through the news reports—those which had been used and those which hadn't. Finally he found what he was looking for.

"You have heard of the Green Arrow," Kring asked Rastol.

"Of course. A bandit and outlaw who achieved some notoriety. What of him?"

"You may not have heard," said Kring, "that his real name became known. To myself and some others who cared to ask, after it was no longer a guarded secret. His name was Acton. . . ."

Kring looked closely at Rastol. The big Martian gave no flicker of recognition.

"A not uncommon name," said Rastol. "Acton was the name of your son, was

it not?"

There was silence in the room. Kring's eyes looked steadily into Rastol's. Ylia stood at the door, her gun no longer pointing at the guest, but down at her side. Toby Black was stopped with a cigarette halfway to his lips.

Scott raised a hand to brush away what he thought might be an insect on the back of his neck. There was nothing there; it was part of the tension.

Kring spoke again. "Was not Acton the name of your son, and did he not fight against you and the things you stood for?"

Rastol's eyes went from one to another in the room. He made no other movement. Even his breathing was not apparent. At length he said:

"Yes, Acton was my son."

KRING'S BREATH came hard, as if he had been holding it.

Then Rastol added: "But what of that? Really, gentlemen, this is a most ridiculous performance. To bring me to this house, to threaten me with weapons and with words and to produce mysterious papers with the flourish of a wandering mystic—this is childish. I must ask you to excuse me. I have an important letter to write President Murain."

"What will the letter say?"

"It will say that I accept humbly, yet with pride that I have been chosen, the position of minister of commerce in the government to which I owe allegiance and wish to serve to the best of my poor ability."

"Allegiance!" Kring spat the word. "You speak of allegiance, who have never known it to anything decent and honorable. You blaspheme the memory of your son's great deeds when you use the word."

"Neither my son nor any creature that crawls on the ground has any bearing on my decision. Your threats and blackmail are unworthy of you, Mr. Kring. And if you persist in this farce, or seek to use your information publicly, I shall be forced to make a noisy and patriotic speech which will look incongruous in my biography but which will have the stupid public applauding from the galleries. I shall say that as an older man I believed in gradual change and that no man was happier than I when Mars became a republic under the aegis of World Government. I shall say, if I am forced to, that of course I had publicly deplored the activities of the man called the Green Arrow, but that I was in good company, for did not Mr. Murain—then not yet President Murain of the Republic-to-be—also plead for peaceful methods of achieving freedom, and urge his followers to shun violence? And if someone is so unfeeling as to mention that Acton was my son, could not my impatience with his activities have been in reality a father's fears for the life of the boy he had loved from the cradle? Oh, I shall make them weep, Mr Kring, and your petty plan will come to nothing. Furthermore, I shall demand your resignation as a sub-commissioner of commerce, and I have little doubt that I shall receive it."

"You are an excellent man with a speech," said Kring. "That I admit. But there is more which you pretend not to know."

"Is there?"

"Much more. You may or may not choose to recall—Druro."

Rastol chose to say nothing. Druro had been one of the blackest marks against the Rockhead regime. It was the name of an infamous concentration camp, in which thousands of prisoners had died of malnutrition and overwork and thousands more had been put to death because of their political views.

"I can tell you something about Druro," said Toby Black. "I was there as a guest of your government—the Rockhead government is the one I'm talking about, Rastol, not the one you claim you're suddenly so fond of."

Toby put out his cigarette and leaned forward. His thin face got hard.

"Kring is a gentleman even when he's dealing with a louse, Rastol, but I'm no diplomat. I'm just a hardheaded old trader from Earth, and maybe some people think my language is crude. But I say what I think, and I don't like you and your kind. Usually I don't mix in politics—my business is construction. I started when I was

a young squirt and built things with my hands, and they got calloused. Now I sit in a fine office and scoot around in a fine air-car, and other men do the dirty work. But that's honest work. The dirty work I can't stomach is your kind, Rastol, and since I've got the chance to undo some of it, or maybe prevent some more of it, I asked Kring to let me speak my piece.'

Scott could easily have been persuaded, if he hadn't known better, that World Government Investigator Toby Black was just that rockribbed businessman-with-a-conscience that he was pretending to be.

Toby went on: "The reason I saw Druro the way mighty few people saw it was that somebody slipped up. Druro was also a factory town and there was room there for a new plant. God knows you had enough slave labor to make it damned profitable. So I was invited by your Rockheads to look over parts of the town so my company could make a bid on building the plant they wanted. But I saw more than you fascists intended, Rastol. I'm an old country boy and I get up early. One day I got up earlier than those gorillas who were supposed to tag around with me to keep my nose clean. And my nose got good and dirty, Rastol. The stench of Druro is still in it. I got out and talked to the people in town, and the people had plenty to tell me about that camp just over the hill. Some of the people I spoke to had been inside it, and they knew what they were talking about."

"An interesting anecdote, Mr. Black," Rastol interrupted, "but I must confess that I see no relevance."

Toby lighted a cigarette and spat out the smoke. "The relevance is coming right up. I heard a lot of different things about Druro from a lot of different people, but one of the things I heard over and over again was the same. It was the name of the man whose signature sent those thousands to their death. I don't have to tell you, Rastol, what that name was. You sign your letters with it every day."

"YOU CAN PROVE nothing," snapped Rastol, his composure jolted for the first time. "It would be your word against mine, and why should anyone believe you?"

"That's true," said Toby. "There's no proof. After I heard of your acquittal I got good and mad about it, and I made a special trip to see if I could find some of those people I'd talked to back then—to get affidavits, if they wouldn't testify in person, to get new evidence. But you and your Rockheads did a good job, all right. You practically wiped out Druro. There wasn't a soul left who would testify against you or any other fascist."

"You see? You have no proof."

"No," said Kring, "no proof that would be good in court. But everyone in this room now is convinced of your guilt. That must be a terrible burden on your conscience. If I were you I should welcome this opportunity to make some slight amend. I appeal to you, Mr Rastol, to decline the post of commerce minister."

Rastol laughed. "You appeal! You beg! This is the weakness of your system. You yourselves are so weak that your government cannot be strong. I know now that the threats against me tonight all were psychological. Even that Q-gun in your daughter's hands. You would not shoot me. It is against your principles. Fortunately I have no principles, and after I have become commerce minister there will be others like me in the cabinet. And then it will not be long before Mars again has the kind of government a planet like this needs. Now I am going—and if any of you decides to remember any of this in public I shall deny it. And then who do you think will be believed?

"Stand aside, young lady. I am leaving."

Rastol got up from his chair.

This wasn't Scott's show, but he spoke up anyway. It looked as if everything else had failed.

He said: "I have quite a story here, Rastol. I haven't been taking notes, but they say I have a stenographic ear."

Rastol whirled on him. "Use it, and I'll sue you and Galactic News Service for libel and everything else in the statutes. I'll deny everything and produce two witnesses for every one of yours. You're not dealing with an amateur, young man. And

now I say good night, you fools."

Kring moved to stand beside his daughter. "There is yet more," he said. "We had hoped to spare you this, although I know now that our concern for your feelings was misguided."

"There is no more," said Rastol. "You have bluffed and you have lost." He whipped his hand through the air. "Stand aside. I am going."

"Stay," said a new voice.

Rastol turned slowly. At the end of the room opposite the door some hangings had parted. Through them from another room had come a tall, cloaked Martian, a young man. Rastol looked at him under a wrinkled forehead.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Hello, Father," said Acton.

Rastol peered across the room. His face seemed to come apart. It went slack, seemed to turn gray.

"You're dead!" cried Rastol. "This is a trick! A disguise! Turn up the lights!"

Acton stepped forward to within a foot of the older man. "Look well," he said. "Is it a disguise?"

"But you're dead. I know you're dead. I—"

"Yes, Father. I should be." Acton's eyes were steady, but without hate. They looked hurt and pitying. "I was at Druro, and you signed the order for my execution yourself. It was carried out, you thought, and the last witness against you was stilled. You thought."

The young man threw back his cloak. He had no left arm. "They took me for dead. The Q-rays burned away my arm and I fell with the others. I was buried among the corpses. But my friends found me later. There wasn't much life in me, but they nourished it, and I am here."

"No!" screamed Rastol. "It's not true! It's a lie!"

He wavered away from his son's gaze and half fell into a chair.

"You deny it," said Acton. "Come, we'll tell the people. They will decide. We'll go to the great square and ask them whom they believe—Rastol or the Green Arrow."

"No," said Rastol. "No . . . no."

BACK in the Galactic News Service bureau, Scott Warren came to the last paragraph of *Today on Mars*. He had written his quota of words about Landing Day and the speeches and parades and carnival. He had a story bigger than any of this, of course, but he couldn't use it. Toby Black asked him not to; not yet.

Rastol had declined Acton's challenge to go before the people. There in Kring's house, under the hard eyes of his son, Rastol had written a letter to President Murain and signed it.

The rest would come later. It took time to get the legal wheels in motion, to prepare a genocide case; but although World Government moved slowly sometimes, it did move. In two months or three or six, Rastol would be indicted and tried, and this time there would be no doubt of the verdict. In the meantime . . .

Scott wrote: "Elsewhere on Mars, these things happened: Fire broke out in Senalla, driving fifty persons from their homes. No one was injured, but damage to the apartment house block was extensive . . . A collision between two air-cars sent three persons to the hospital in Iopa with critical injuries . . . A sandstorm blowing across the desert 100 miles northeast of Iopa has cut communications with the town of Ramor . . . And Rastol decided against accepting the post of commerce minister, which had been offered to him by President Murain. Rastol said he was honored by the offer, but that the pressure of private affairs made it impossible for him to accept."

Scott Warren typed "30" at the end of his copy and sent it off to Interradio for transmission to Earth. He resigned himself to the possibility that the night desk in the New York bureau would cut out his last paragraph to save space.

Verrill spurred in, shooting . . .

EXILE FROM VENUS

By E. HOFFMAN PRICE

THE SOLICITUDE OF LINDA'S voice, the seductiveness of her perfume, her very presence as they sat in the artificial twilight of the Domes of Venus, tempted him to abandon his plan to sail at once for Terra, venture among the savage Terrestrians, and get possession of that enormous ruby they called the Fire of Skanderbek.

Linda was long legged and supple

Earth was a world of murdering savages; bleak and desolate; contaminated by deadly radioactivity. Only Craig Verrill's atavistic stubbornness—and a rash promise, made in fury — could have brought him back to that perilous birthplace of Man . . .

waisted, with dark eyes and gold-bronze hair, and very white skin. Her cheek bones were just sufficiently prominent to keep her face from being too regular; and there was a perceptible dusting of tiny freckles which accented the irregularity, adding a piquant touch. These were natural, and a rarity that had existed only in fable for the past six-hundred years, for the glow-lamps and the occlusive Venusian atmosphere seemed to combine to make the freckle almost impossible. However, though the cosmeticians had driven the Board of Science frantic until they had devised a process for artificially imitating Linda's unique flaw, this distinction had not spoiled her.

"Never mind what I said, last night," Linda pleaded. "We were all angry, you and Gil and I. No sense at all!"

"But I promised," Verrill said stubbornly. Which helped—a little—to sustain himself against backing down from the rash venture for which he had not a bit of taste.

He had an angular face, narrowish, with the bony structure well accented. His nose was prominent; his hazel eyes were intent and impatient. He was lean, muscular, and all in all, just the sort of Venusian to go on such a crazy venture—yet he didn't like the idea at all, now that he had had time to consider.

"Let's forget it all, Craig! Rubies aren't important enough. The one Gil brought me from that trading post of Terra isn't —wasn't—"

Verrill said sourly: "That's what makes me feel so foolish about it. He brought you a souvenir, and I grabbed it from you, flung it into the lake, and pasted him. What for?"

"Oh, Craig, who *cares!* Gil was lording it over you. I was too smug and pleased with the gift to realize how far he was going. Oh, all right, of *course* you were wrong! But what of it?"

Verrill shook his head. "I fairly shouted myself into it."

"I don't want you to go."

"I know you don't. But too many of our friends were within sight and hearing of the whole mess. Sooner or later their attitude would make you unhappy about a man who talked big, and then backed down."

HIS INSISTENCE widened Linda's eyes. The civilized Venusians were always ready to take the sensible, the expedient way. Had they been otherwise, had they not been the descendants of sensible Terrestrian ancestors, they would have been included in the devastation which had left all but small and widely scattered patches of Terra uninhabitable for the past seven-hundred years. Rather, those who today were Venusians would have been struggling savages, scraping out a living in some uncontaminated area.

Verrill's was an almost Terrestrian stubbornness; something primitive and atavistic, very much like that queer quirk which made some Venusians return to their native Earth to set up trading-posts, where they bartered with the barbarian tribesmen for tobacco and wines, spices and jewels and perfumes, all manner of luxuries which Venus did not offer.

Linda made her final appeal: "Leaving all this, to scramble around in that terrible waste and desolation—oh, do be sensible!"

Her voice, and the kiss that followed it, made Verrill at once aware of what generations of Venusians had taken for granted. He looked across the gardens and the lake, and up at the prodigous span of girders. The original purpose of the structure had been to house a military outpost that was to have outflanked a comparable one on Luna. In the years just before The War, engineers and scientists had been sent from Terra to build those enormous domes, plastic-sheathed and air-tight, to exclude the raging dust-storms and the overwhelming concentration of formaldehyde which made up most of the natural Venusian atmosphere. Rather than rely on any system depending upon chemically prepared oxygen, they had established gardens, orchards, fields of plant-life which liberated sufficient oxygen to maintain the required balance.

This was to have been simply a garrison. According to plan, it would have played a decisive part in the final clash for Terrestrian supremacy. Meanwhile,

there had come to be little difference between the rival dictatorships, except in the wording of their slogans. The Anglo-Capitalist Bloc had borrowed all the kinds and twists of regimentation of the rival bloc. The difference finally became one of flavor rather than principle.

A cool-headed few, in command of the Venusian garrison, had seen that neither side could win; that there would be only mutual and total destruction. The warfare became more and more atrocious; and the Anglo-Capitalist Bloc drifted further and further from the sort of organization that the Venus garrison, in no immediate danger, could contemplate defending with enthusiasm. Thus, when one day the Lunar Base radio complained of attack by suicide-ships and then went abruptly silent, the Venusian Base, which might have been expected to cry "Geronimo!" and leap into the holocaust, instead underwent a short and violent revolution in which the ardently military were disposed of. Then, stubbornly intending to survive chaos and idiocy, the Venus Base folded its hands and sat out the fatal clash that ended The War and virtually the whole of Terrestrian civilization with it . . .

After several centuries, the Venus Council risked an exploration party to Terra to see whether the globe was becoming fit for human habitation again. Large areas had, of course, through natural processes become decontaminated; there were scattered colonies of survivors—farmers, herdsmen, hunters, armed with clubs, spears, and other primitive weapons. Contact was made, communication struck up, trade—of considerable importance to both—established; and, after the ten years which this took, the Venusians were left with very little inclination to colonize Terra. Life under the domes was comfortable, with controlled climate, law and order, science and art. Comfortable, civilized, and sensible. While Terra—

"Be a sensible Venusian", was what Linda meant. *"Don't go looking for trouble when you can do better without. Don't be a typical Terrestrian!"*

The whole clash of the previous night had been silly. Irritated by Gil Dawson's giving Linda a ruby as a souvenir of his official inspection-tour of the Council-controlled Terrestrian trading-posts, Verrill had flung the trinket into the lake. After a brisk fracas in which Dawson had finally wearied of getting up, only to be knocked down again, Verrill had shouted to Linda and to most of Venus that he'd get her a man's-sized ruby, the Fire of Skanderbek. She, thoroughly outraged, had told him and Dawson that by Heaven she'd not be the prize, either of a brawl or a souvenir-finding contest. To make it good, she had concluded by telling Verrill that he'd be far better occupied if he got the Venus Council to assign him to one of the committees for improving the living-standards of the Terrestrians, and won the Fire of Skanderbek as a token of their gratitude.

But however earnestly she besought him to forget it all, Verrill was just as unhappily determined to go through with it. "I can't back down. Dawson will surely take a crack at stealing the Fire himself—and that would make it tough for me. And for you."

"Oh, let the fool try!" she cried, desperately. "He'd never come back from the territory of those wildmen."

Verrill shook his head. "He might come back. Even though I did give him a trouncing, he's anything but a clown. You wouldn't accept the Fire of Skanderbek if he offered it—but he'd give it to someone else, and then—well, a lot of women do dislike you! There's nothing I can do, except to beat him to it."

And so, Verrill went to do as he had to do.

THE SPACE-FREIGHTER veered from her course only a little; instead of landing in the sun-blasted plain at the foot of the mountains into which Verrill was to go, she launched a crew-boat which took him to the trading-post at the foot of barren limestone bulwarks.

Dawson was not at the post. But while a head start was a happy omen, Verrill knew that it had its limits, since his plan to ingratiate himself with the barbarians until he could seize the fetish-ruby and return to the post involved so much time that the gain of hours or days meant little.

Ingratiate himself—steal the Fire of Skanderbek—and get out—infinitely simpler than Linda's suggestion, probably an utterly impossible one, of deserving it finally as a gift. His first look at the bearded mountaineers convinced him that no amount of do-gooding could ever move them to gratitude.

Those lounging in the compound of the fortified trading-post wore homespun pants and sheepskin jackets. They fairly clanked with trade daggers, trade pistols, and trade hatchets; some carried trade muskets, and some had the new repeating rifles. Tbeir tanned and hairy faces and bitter eyes made it plain that looting and robbing, brawling and mayhem and murder were their very breath of life.

They spoke the international language which had developed sufficiently to come into common use around 2200 A.D. English, while a nightmare of contradictions to baffle a foreigner, had offered these advantages: next to Chinese, no other language was so free of inflections; and it could so readily assimilate all manner of foreign words. Thus, since the tone-deaf Occidental had not been able to master the simplicities of Chinese or other Mongolian tongues, the Asiatics had taken up English, with wbich had been blended Arabic, Urdu, Malay, and a good deal of Western European; and, while seven centuries of Venusian isolation had made the speech of the people of the Domes diverge from the original international Terrestrian, Verrill had not too much difficulty in making himself understood.

"This black bag," he told a group of the caravan men, "will interest Ardelan —that's your chief's name, isn't it? Let me go into the mountains with you to talk to him."

"You're crazy," a craggy faced fellow with drooping moustaches and hard blue eyes told him, levelly. "You think I'm crazy."

Verrill laid out three daggers. He picked one up, jabbed it into the top of a table cluttered with heaps of goatskins, dried apricots, raisins, and bags of coriander seed. He bent the weapon until the grip touched the table top. He released it. It snapped straight up, with a fine, high pitched *spang*. He plucked a dagger from the mountaineer's belt, drew the other weapon from the table, and slashed them edge to edge.

He cut shavings from the mountaineer's weapon. Then he stropped his own blade on the palm of his hand for a couple of strokes, and next ran it along his arm. The hairs toppled as he cut them free; there was no drag at all, the edge was so keen.

"Mine are not trade daggers," he said. "Bet you the three that Ardelan will listen to me, and not throw me out."

The Terrestrian's eyes gleamed. "What do I put up for a bet?"

"A pair of those boots you're wearing. Put my knives in your belt now. If I lose my bet, they're yours. If I win, you're welcome to them anyway."

So the caravan men fitted him out with garments and boots like their own; and Verrill went into the mountains with them.

II

THE TRAIL SNAKED ALONG precipices and wound past narrow, hidden valleys. At the foot of a cliff lay the shell of a space-cruiser which had been telescoped from its original six-hundred feet to a bare two-hundred, though much of the nose had melted from the impact against the rocks. Gnarled oaks and junipers reached up from a riven seam of the shell. The metal had not rusted. It was merely tarnished to a slate gray. It was a mine of such metal as could have furnished all manner of implements for the Terrestrians—but they did not know how to exploit it.

Finally, Verrill was looking down into narrow, upland meadows where sheep grazed. There were barley patches. His eyes felt as though they were full of sand. The snow-white glare from cliffs, and the dust which rose in yellow puffs at every step, made the way a torment for one accustomed to the paradisiacal clime of the Venusian Domes.

Each day's march brought the donkey-caravan within sight of alternate trails, guarded by mud-brick towers, where armed men were stationed to watch the moves of hostile neighbors. The return, even

without pursuit, would be dangerous.

At last they came to Ardelan's mud-walled houses, huddled on a rocky shelf which overhung a fertile valley. The settlement was surrounded by a wall of earth and stone, and had escaped contamination because no one would have bombed a 12,000 foot range of limestone peaks except by mistake.

When the trading convoy filed into the tangle of flat-roofed houses which surrounded a hard-packed central square, women, children, and dogs came out, each in full voice. The procession kept straight on toward the entrance of a two-storeyed building. Half the ground-level was a stable; the rest, a courtyard where Ardelan and a handful of armed companions lolled under an awning of black goat-hair.

Terrestrian faces were no novelty to Verrill; but this time, being a stranger among them—instead of merely a spectator seeing a handful of them, half defiant and half uneasy in the strangeness of a trading-post—he saw what he had never before noticed. They tended toward height and ranginess, prominence of nose, angularity of face; yet behind this likeness was a shadow-pattern of racial differentiation. There were differences of flavor, rather than of outright form. The flare of a nostril, the shape of an eye, the fullness or thinness of lip—a thick necked one, here and there, suggested that, generations back, there had been among his ancestors a blocky Mongol from Central Asia.

The guards, instead of presenting Verrill, explained him as though he had been some trade article. Ardelan, listening, studied his visitor with entire impersonality, as he might have scrutinized a basket of fresh ripe apricots to see how they had endured being hauled so far.

"What's in the bag?" he demanded, abruptly.

"Medicine. I am a doctor."

"What for? People die anyway."

"A doctor," Verrill explained, concealing his dismay, "is not to keep people from dying. He is to make it more agreeable for them until they finally have to die."

Ardelan addressed his henchmen. The answers summed up to this: that if nothing much ailed a man, he'd get well by himself, and if something really incapacitated him, it would of course be something so serious that he could not last long at the best.

Ardelan digested this wisdom, then asked, "Verrill, can you make knives like these you gave that man?"

"I am a doctor, not a blacksmith."

"Can you make guns or cartridges?"

"No."

"Can you fight?"

Verrill glanced uneasily about, as though Ardelan might be on the point of selecting an opponent to test the stranger's claims. And, having read Verrill's face, Ardelan snorted, and not waiting for a reply, demanded, "Then what are you good for?"

"To treat the sick," Verrill repeated, with growing sense of futility. "To bind wounds. To set broken bones."

"Look at us. We've done very well."

"I can do better."

"Can't work, can't fight! Good for nothing but doctoring. Bad as a priest! Lock him up; I want to think this over."

The guard hustled Verrill and his medical case into an empty granary. They slammed the door and rolled a boulder against it. It made no difference whether or not he could shove the door open; there was nowhere to go if he did get out. He could not find his way back to the trading-post except over the way which his escort had brought him: a guarded way.

IN THE HALF-GLOOM, Verrill noted that the wall had been cracked by earthquakes. These cracks gave him hand and toe holds, to climb up until he could catch the rough-hewn timber which supported the roof of brush and clay. Lying on the crown of the wall, he could look out through rifts in the roof.

Herdsmen were driving their flocks in from distant slopes. Others drove donkeys laden with brush. Verrill was appalled by the ever present evidence that Terrestrian life was a matter of digging, scratching, and enduring the elements. The stark emptiness of the sky worried him; he was accustomed to the perpetual twilight and impenetrable clouds of Venus.

Well away from the settlement, and outside the wall, was a small, squatty cube with a small tower at each corner. The structure was backed up against an overhanging cliff, and was unapproachable except from the walled town. The precipitous ending of the shelf guarded the whitewashed cube more surely than if it had been within the town wall.

The open doorway was so large in proportion to the structure itself that surmise made Verrill's pulse hammer. That must be the shrine where the Fire of Skanderbek was kept.

Toward dusk, drums rumbled and trumpets of ram's horns bawled hoarsely. Men carrying tightly bound bundles of brush marched in procession toward the whitewashed cube, and chanted as they went. When they came to the place, they filed in, each coming out with his faggots ablaze.

They returned to their houses. Before long, Verrill's captors brought him a bowl of mutton stew, and leathery cakes of bread. "They couldn't have cooked this stuff so soon," he reasoned. "It must have been cooking all the while, on fires already lighted. That procession was fire worship."

He sat there a long time after he had licked the gravy from his fingers. A shocking business: meat so plentiful that it was fed to a prisoner, and yet the barbarians knew nothing at all about cookery.

The town swarmed with flies. Vultures perched on the walls and watch-towers, waiting to clean up the garbage and offal flung from the houses. The community well had a nasty taint from surface drainage from the stables. Verrill, after a bad night's sleep, spent the morning deciding that when pestilence did break out, he would need his medical supplies for himself.

The women, shapely and graceful, gathered about the well to fill the earthenware jugs they carried balanced on their heads. They chattered mainly about the outsider, giving most emphasis to his looks, though devoting certain speculation to his possible usefulness, and probable destination.

"Kwangtan," they all agreed, "wants him killed or sent away."

From what he could piece together from the various relays of women he overheard, Verrill concluded that Kwangtan was the keeper of the shrine; and that medical practice was the monopoly of old women, who cooked up herbs. These potions, plus Kwangtan's incantations, kept the community in health.

The drowsy silence of midafternoon was broken by an hysterical screeching and screaming. Before Verrill could arouse himself from the stupor of half suffocation, the door was jerked open and several men pounced for him.

"You, with the medicine! Work for you. Bring the black box!"

THEY HUSTLED HIM to a house where several old women were shaking and back-slapping a boy of three or four. The kid's mother, one of the few redheads in the colony, was wailing at a pitch that made Verrill shiver. A beetle-browed young man with a wiry beard squatted on the floor, looking helpless. All he did was repeat, "Get Kwangtan!" And no one paid him any heed at all.

At the sight of Verrill, one of the old women laid the child on a sheepskin spread on the floor. The child's face was gray. His lips were bluish. His eyes bugged out. He wheezed agonizingly. It made Verrill's skin twitch, just to see the little fellow's losing battle for breath. He was slowly choking. With all voices suddenly stilled at Verrill's approach, the sound became all the more ominous.

In his utter perplexity and dismay, Verrill hoped that what he heard was the death-rattle which would relieve him of the task about to be forced upon him. The absence of Kwangtan, the holy man, told him the story: that wise fellow was not going to lose any prestige by tackling something he could not handle.

"What's wrong?" Verrill asked, with a show of assurance.

"You're a doctor," the kid's father snarled. "Do something."

"He swallowed an apricot seed," the child's redhaired mother said. "It's stuck, we can't shake it out, he's choking. Get it out, you blinking fool!"

The kid's father drew and cocked his pistol. The dry click chilled Verrill to the heart. He remembered an old story of an

emergency operation at a trading-post. The yarn had given the Venusians quite a thrill.

Ardelan stalked in. He nodded his approval of the man who had a pistol trained on the doctor. "Stranger, do not make any mistakes. Kwangtan has warned us."

Verrill had a raft of Venusian specifics for just about every known ailment; he had counted, however, on nothing of the sort which now confronted him—had looked forward simply to giving the savages pills, and swabbing them with antiseptics. As he knelt, he fumbled helplessly with the instruments in the case.

"Do this right," Ardelan said. "Or he shoots."

Verrill loaded a hypo with a local anaesthetic. The glint of metal, and the sudden end of the child's gagging as the injection stilled his struggles, nearly cost Verrill his life. Ardelan's big hand knocked the pistol out of line as it blazed, and the slug scorched Verrill's cheek and pounded a chunk out of the wall.

"He's not dead," the chief said, "Not yet."

A splash of antiseptic.

Then, nerving himself, Verrill made a slit in the throat. There was not much blood. He got the apricot seed free. With haggling jabs, he took a couple of stitches. He taped and bandaged.

Then, shoulders sagging, he settled back, trying to keep from toppling to the floor. The kid's lips were no longer hluish. He was hreathing freely. At last he hlinked, cried out, and reached for his throat.

"He's brought him back to life!" the redhead cried, and snatched up the boy.

VERRILL CRUMPLED. He toppled, and sprawled. He was, however, conscious, and when he heard what the mountaineers were saying he realized that had he done it intentionally, he could not have done better than collapse.

One said, "He's left his body for awhile to fight off the devils, so they won't come back to hurt the kid."

Verrill muttered and mumbled until, satisfied that his act had been up to their expectation, he sat up. Again, he faced a pistol, but this time it was presented butt foremost.

"Take it, doctor. It's yours," the kid's father said.

And now Kwangtan, the fire priest, joined the group.

His deep-set eyes blazed fiercely. His face was sunken. His hands were like parchment drawn over bones. He wore white pants and a white shirt. His beard and his shoulder-length hair were white. For a moment, Verrill thought that the old fellow was a veteran of The War. His age made him fantastic in a colony where men over forty were scarce, and those over fifty, rarities; though old women were more than plentiful.

Verrill declined the gift of the pistol. "Give it to the holy man," he said. "I did not come here for pay."

Then he went with Ardelan to sit under the black awning where the chief settled disputes, and planned raids on neighboring tribes.

"Excellency," Verrill pointed out, "holding a pistol at a doctor's head is no way of making sure he'll help the patient."

"You are a stranger. You might have killed him with a curse."

"He was already nearly dead."

"But he was still alive, and you might have finished him."

"He must have known I'd do my best."

"Still, if the boy had died, that clan would have lost a fighting man, so your clan had to lose. That is our law."

"Is that why Kwangtan wouldn't help?"

"Not at all. He's not a stranger. And if the women who were working on the boy had kept at it until he choked to death, no one would have hurt them. They're not strangers."

"The quicker I get out of here, the better!"

Ardelan permitted himself to smile. "Once you are no longer a stranger, doctoring will not be so dangerous."

III

AS ARDELAN'S RESERVE thawed out, Verrill pressed him with questions. "Your men talk about nothing but raids on your neighbors' flocks, and about feuds. Haven't you enough sheep?"

"Doctor, you know how to save lives, but you know nothing at all about living."

Ardelan pointed toward the gateway, which opened from courtyard to the square. Half a dozen women, high-breasted and long-limbed, were gossiping at the well. Their wild gracefulness was blood-stirring. Verrill contrasted them with the studiedly elegant ladies of Venus, and with Linda particularly.

"We have enough sheep, and enough women," the chief explained. "The sheep don't make trouble. The women do. If my men are not to cut each other's throats, they must have outside enemies to keep them busy. Or the jealousies of their wives would prod them to too much competition with each other."

Thinking back to his quarrel with Gil Dawson, Verrill had to concede Ardelan's point and principle. And then he got back to the perils of being a stranger. The following day, he proposed, "Let me take part in the fire ceremony of an evening. In that way, I won't be a stranger so long."

The chief got up, presently, and clapped his hands. A retainer came forward with two horses. They were hammer-headed, shaggy, Roman-nosed, and with fierce eyes. The saddles were sheep-skin pads. There were no stirrups.

Verrill said, "Excellency, you ride. I'll walk."

They set out for the shrine. Meanwhile, half a dozen horsemen came in from the other end of the shelf. One, overtaking Verrill and the chief, slowed down enough to exchange a hail, and then pressed on. Before they came to the shrine, the rider had finished his business with Kwangtan, and was leaving.

He circled wide, to avoid an encounter. This made Verrill uneasy. The man was dust-caked, sweat-drenched, and sagging.

Ardelan frowned. "More trouble! That's one of the outpost guards. I wish I could have just the right amount of raiding, and no more."

"He might have told you what it was about."

"He will, at the sunset council. But Kwangtan has to dip his long nose into everything first, or he makes trouble."

They got the news in a hurry.

Standing in the entrance of the shrine, Kwangtan cursed his chief and the doctor as well. "Get that fellow out of here! He's come to steal the Fire of Skanderbek. And you're a fool for allowing him around here!"

Ardelan endured the cursing until he had a chance to ask, "Have you had another vision, Holy One?"

"The man who just rode up told me what I had already learned from the fire gods. This Verrill has promised the ruby to one of his women."

"Who said that?" Verrill demanded.

"One of your own people who fly down from heaven. One called Dawson. At the trading-post. Dawson talked about you to our men, and to our neighbors."

"You stick to your own business," Ardelan interposed, quietly. "He will stick to his. He is an outlaw from his own people. Naturally, his enemies try to harm him."

The snarling saint listened. He and Ardelan eyed each other. What unspoken thought passed between them was beyond Verrill's guessing; yet it must have had force, for Kwangtan offered no objection when Ardelan said, "Verrill, come in with me and bow to the flame."

THE INTERIOR of the shrine was much larger than the front had suggested. This was because of a grotto in the overhang of the cliff. From a rift in the natural shelf of rock came hissing jets of fire. They wavered, varied, blending into each other and separating again.

Behind the low barrier of flames was a monstrous ruby, uncut, yet a perfect hexagonal crystal, with edges clean and sharp. This was not from any alluvial deposit, else the faces would have been dulled and the edges chipped.

Whether or not the stone had been polished, Verrill could not even surmise. At all events, this was a ruby that had come from the original matrix, the rocky birthplace of gems. It collected all the wavering light, transformed it, and poured it back again, transmuted into living red. The crystal seemed to pulsate with a life of its own.

The beauty and the splendor made Ver-

rill picture the Fire of Skanderbek against Linda's white skin—and the wonder of it must have showed in his face, rather than the resolve to have the gem at any cost, for Kwangtan's radiant hostility softened perceptibly. Verrill imitated Ardelan's gesture and bow: and the two withdrew from the shrine.

"I don't doubt," said Ardelan, once he was in the saddle, and Verrill tramping alongside, "that you'd steal it if you could get out of here with it. Don't try it. Maybe I could—but probably I could not—save your life."

"You'd not try any too hard."

"You are wrong," the chief countered, earnestly. "Slitting that kid's gullet and not hurting him was something I'd never heard about. Maybe you can be useful around here."

"Not with what Kwangtan thinks of me."

"It really depends on the women—though quite a few of the men believe in the fire god."

"You don't," Verrill said, boldly. "Though you do wonder a lot about fire that comes out of a rock, with no fuel."

"I don't wonder as much as you think. There's a place, far away from here, where a blaze like that comes from the ground sometimes when a camp fire is built too near it. But the wind whisks the flames out and then there's nothing but a smell."

Verrill had by now revised somewhat his notions on savages. "Then why do you put up with that wild-eyed fanatic?"

Ardelan smiled indulgently. "You people from the outside know many strange things. How to come down from the stars. How to make guns. But the few of you I've talked to are dog-ignorant when it comes to people. The fire god is something our neighbors don't have. It makes us stick together better, and keeps us from fighting among ourselves. Aren't any of your people smart enough to have gods?"

Verrill answered, with feigned humility, "I came to teach you people a few things but it seems I can learn something. Then it will be a fair exchange."

The next day, he had Ardelan send a courier to the trading-post. The man carried an order for a consignment of medical supplies to be sent from the Venusian Domes via the next freighter. There was also a letter for Linda, telling of the success of his first operation, and of Dawson's first move to make trouble. *"But Gil was a bit late,"* he wrote. *"I'd already got in pretty solid. That won't keep him from trying something else. He must have talked a good deal before he left. If you hear any gossip as to what he planned to do or how he intended to do it, be sure and write me the details. From all I've seen of Terra so far, they should have bombed it even more than they did. One well-organized Dome is worth a dozen Earths. But the natives don't seem to mind a bit. . . ."*

KNIFE AND GUNSHOT WOUNDS and fractures, Verrill reasoned, would make up most of his practice: surgery, that is, in its engineering aspect, rather than as a corrective of ailments. And the centuries, fortunately, had worked to keep his task from being utterly beyond a well-educated layman. Whereas in the twentieth century, there had not been more than two or three specifics, there were now ten times as many. It was a matter of taking the proper bottle, just as, in ancient times, one had reached automatically for quinine, the primitive specific against malaria.

Meanwhile, what had been his prison became his home and his dispensary. During his wait for the shipment from Venus, he instituted a garbage-disposal program. He condemned the shallow well, and had them build a wooden flume from a spring high up on the mountainside. Each radical move, however, had to wait until a cure he had effected assured him of sufficient momentary popularity to enable him to kick an ancient unsanitary practice overboard.

Then one night came a furtive sound at his door, as though someone were trying to enter by stealth. A cold shiver trickled down his spine. Though he doubted that the fire priest was coming to dispose of him, there was all too much chance that Kwangtan had convinced one of the tribe that carving the stranger would in the long run be beneficial. Despite the warning, and Verrill's readiness

for whatever might be creeping up, he had his moment of terror. However well he handled himself, he could not win—for if he killed an intruder, there would be a blood feud.

Groping in the dark, he found a length of firewood. He had to end the matter by knocking the other out before he could come to grips to make it a finish fight. Stealthily, he skirted the wall. He heard the soft mumble of the leather-hinged door as it dragged the hard earth. A sliver of moonlight reached into the darkness. Barefooted, Verrill made no sound as be evaded the widening streak of light. A patch of shadow broke it. A dark shape edged into the gloom. Verrill measured the distance. He gathered himself.

He had to make sure whether there was only that one, or whether others b a d joined. He held his breath until his pulse hammered in his ears. The motion at the door had stopped. He was afraid to exhale—

And then he breathed again.

The one who approached had long hair which mirrored red glints. She had shifted enough for the moonlight to outline the curve of cheek and throat, and hint at the smoothness of shoulder and ripeness of breast. The arms were white and slender. Her stalking motion was beautiful even in the obscurity.

There was a whisper of sandals, and of breath. She was then of a sudden close against him, and seemingly not at all surprised. It was as though she had expected him to be precisely where they met in the darkness. He must have dropped the cudgel, for at the first touch of her, he was stroking the sleek red hair, and with the other hand tracing the curve of waist and back.

She snuggled closer, and he said, "Falana!" as though touch and taste and smell had identified the girl as surely as sight. She was Falana, the aunt of his first patient. She wore the shapeless, crude garments of the tribe, yet it was as though there were neitber homespun nor even a wisp of air between them.

Falana had no words to waste as she found his mouth in the darkness. There was nothing to explain. When he stepped back and further into the gloom, she was close as ever; and, as if seeing in the darkness, she seemed to know exactly where he spread his sheepskin mat—

She did know. Or else be must have remembered.

When Falana finally got around to talking with words, she did not tell him how sbe had admired him from first sight, or that his surgery had been marvelous. She said, "I'll bring my things over in the morning," and yawned contentedly, and snuggled closer.

VERRILL spent a restless night, being intensely occupied in telling himself, over and over again, that Venus was a long way off, and that whatever happened on Terra did not really count, unless as a result he became embroiled in feuds on Falana's account and to such an extent that he would be unable to make off with the Fire of Skanderbek.

Well before dawn, Falana went to the door to get a small bundle she had left lying at the jamb. Before Verrill knew what was happening, he got his first whiff of breakfast cooked in his own home.

"Eating with neighbors," Falana observed, "must have been awful. And you never know who might poison you."

Watching Falana patting oat cakes into shape, and baking them on a hot rock, he began to see her as a very pleasant reality, though he could not help but go long-faced when he considered bow he had without doubt inherited a few dangerous animosities as well.

She must have read his thought, for she said, "It's much better this way, Verrill. You haven't more than maybe one-two-three enemies on my account. But as long as you lived alone, doctoring all day while most of the men are out with the flocks, they'd all be suspecting and hating you."

There was nothing to explain to Ardelan. The chief seemed to have been expecting something of the sort. "Falana," he said to Verrill, "probably didn't get around to telling you this, but you can either send her home, or else take her to the fire temple to get Kwangtan's blessing. Then you won't be a stranger any more, and you'll get along better."

That very day, Falana and Verrill knelt before the altar of living flame and passed their joined hands quickly through the fire. This time, Verrill got a good look at the shrine as Kwangtan blessed them.

He likewise got a look at the surroundings. He noted Kwangtan's cell, hewn out of the limestone cliff. He noted the cairns of rock raised above the grave of each of Kwangtan's predecessors. Having sized up the situation, he decided that his next move would be to ride a circuit of Ardelan's territory, to treat those tribesmen who rarely if ever got to town. By becoming acquainted with all the trails, he would have a better chance of escaping with the Fire of Skanderbek.

Too bad he could not take Falana along. She would be a sensation, back home. The most skilled cosmeticians of the Venusian Domes could not begin to duplicate Falana's glowing red-bronze hair.

IV

BY THE TIME MEDICAL SUPplies and equipment arrived—and also a message from Linda, who was thrilled from having heard of his good work among the barbarians — Ardelan's mountaineers had begun to accept Verrill as a man, and not a mere medico. His efforts to ride their half-tamed horses, time and again picking himself up from where they had thrown him, to mount and try again, amused them enormously, and gave them a comfortable feeling of superiority—and evoked a degree of respect.

To make his escape with the Fire of Skanderbek, he would have to ride on a few cattle- and sheep-stealing raids and so acquire sufficient skill for getting away with his loot.

It was Falana who explained the monstrous ruby's status as a tribal fetish. "Ages ago," she said, "the gods destroyed the world with fire, and after the flames had gone, the ghosts of the dead flames danced over the earth, and killed whoever came near. They killed without burning. The ghosts of the fire lived in the earth and air and water. And there were only small patches where men could live.

"And there was Skanderbek, a wise man who talked to the ghosts. Maybe he smelled them. Maybe he could see what others could not. Others say that he had a talisman that talked to him, and warned him where not to go. There are many stories.

"Skanderbek led his people to these mountains in time to keep them from starving or being poisoned. He made fire come out of the rock. Everlasting fire. Over it he hung the fire stone you now see. He taught us to bow to the fire and serve it, so that when the fire gods stopped hating mankind, the ghosts of the dead flames would go away. The years passed, and there was always further range for our animals. Other people came, and then of course there was looting and war.

"But Skanderbek talked with gods and devils, and so no one could drive us out of here. One day Skanderbek said, 'I am going back to the gods. Let such and such a one take my place; I have taught him what to do and what to say to the holy flame, so that fire will never again destroy the earth. And one day, wearing a new body, I will come back.' All this was a long time ago, long before your people came out of the sky with knives of steel, and with guns, to trade with us.

"And now tell me about your gods, Verrill."

There was very little to tell Falana, except that Science had become, had from the beginning been the god of Venus. He was quite too busy reflecting that Skanderbek, a man like himself, had undoubtedly used a Geiger counter and some imagination, and had as a result become a god.

He was thinking also of Linda's letter. She had not been able to give him much gossip about Dawson's plans to oppose him, since Dawson had left without having done much talking. But he inferred from what she did write, and from stories Ardelan's tribesmen brought from the disputed frontier, that a Venusian was living with the neighboring tribe, giving them rifles to take the place of their trade muskets. This suggested that Dawson was taking the simple and direct approach: coaching his protectors in the art of more efficient fighting, so that as the climax of

an eventual raid into Ardelan's almost inaccessible fortress, Dawson could seize the Fire of Skanderbek and make off with it in the confusion.

Whatever Verrill intended to do, he would have to do it quickly.

HE WENT to the shrine and asked, "Kwangtan, where is the grave of Skanderbek?"

"Skanderbek," the priest said, contemptuous of ignorance, "is not buried. He went back to the gods. Now go, and stay away."

"I have heard a story like *that*," Verrill retorted. "Among my own people, there are old books, ancient before Skanderbek was even dreamed of. And it is written always how one leader or another went back to the gods, not dying as other men died. But we know better. A man dies, and his bones remain."

Kwangtan's eyes sharpened and changed. He seemed to be asking himself whether this might not be one of those times when the wise thing was to make an ally of an enemy. And Verrill was at the same time thinking, *"Lies are the foundation of all priestcraft, and I've got this one searching the foundations."*

Verrill said, "If a man found the bones of Skanderbek, he could build a shrine there for the gods of death. Men serve most what they fear most."

"Which of us fears death?" the priest challenged. "We are fighting-men."

"My patients act otherwise," Verrill blandly countered. Then: "Skanderbek had no wings. His bones can not be far from here. The bones of Skanderbek will give a light like a glow-worm or a firefly. Wherever they are lying, they will be easily recognized. Any herdsman would know if he found them."

Verrill was gambling on the probability that Skanderbek, leading a group of Terrestrians to safety, had exposed himself overmuch to the deadly radioactivity, more so than any of those he led. Whether there had been sufficient to make his bones radioactive until they would glow, either then or now, was an open question. But Kwangtan was of the line of priests who create and maintain a tradition: the blend of knowledge and falsehood that keeps their craft alive and their privilege secure. Kwangtan would surely have enough of that blend to set him wondering, and in his own interests.

It was time to leave; and, nodding contentedly, Verrill left, rightly assured that the old devil would lose no time hunting the bones of Skanderbek, lest someone else find them first and set up a rival shrine. He would have to hunt by night, and alone. The nights were cold, and the trails dangerous.

A few nights later, Verrill went out, high on the rimrock, to lurk in a perilous perch overhanging the shrine. He saw Kwangtan momentarily outlined by the light that came from the grotto. The priest was making for the spring, and then climbing higher. Apparently he was going out by a secret way, for a concealed purpose. Well satisfied, Verrill climbed down out of the bitter cold wind which whined eternally about the limestone buttresses. Unobserved, he went down again into the shelter of the ledge, and to the house where Falana was asleep.

She no more perceived his return than she had his departure.

BEFORE MANY DAYS had passed, Verrill was busily probing for bullets, suturing sword slashes, and setting bones. When the fighting men he had salvaged were well enough to be about and looking for more trouble, Ardelan confessed that he had entirely revised his notions on doctors. And that gave Verrill his chance to say, "I'll go along the next time there's a raid. I could have saved that one who died on the way."

Ardelan shook his head. "There is a personal enemy of yours among our neighbors. I can't take any chance of your being killed or captured."

"You're making a priest of me!" Verrill said, mockingly. "Living on the fat of the land, and taking none of the risks."

"You've made that for yourself," Ardelan retorted. "And speaking of priests, you'll have one for a patient."

"How's that?"

"Kwangtan is coughing a lot. He's failing rapidly. We had always thought he

would live forever."

Verrill shrugged. "He's old, so old he hasn't much time left. He'd rather die a little sooner than admit that there is anything I could possibly do for him. Letting me treat him would be casting serious reflections on the fire god. How was the raid—did it pay?"

"Pretty well, all around."

"A few more sheep, and some more work for me!"

"More than that," Ardelan corrected. "There's a nice looking valley, but it's always been deadly. Poisonous from the beginning. We've never used it. That stranger, that Dawson, must have found out that the curse is no longer on the soil. They've been using it for their flocks. Well, it's ours, it always has been, so we ran them out."

"They'll come back?"

"Of course they will; but with enough raids, we'll discourage them, and then we can send some of our own people to hold it permanently. Build a settlement."

Verrill had heard talk of all this, but not in such clear terms; now, having got it from the chief, he could take notice, and he was prepared.

"Your oldest son will live there," Verrill surmised, "to represent you?"

Ardelan nodded. "Good experience for him against the day of my death, when he will rule the tribe."

"That's been worrying you."

Ardelan's brows bristled and his eyes went fierce. "Worrying about the day of my death—what do you mean?"

"I meant, worrying about your son's taking an exposed outpost."

"It's good experience for him."

"It's worrying you. The next son is six years younger."

The chief grimaced. "He's a reckless young fool and a show-off. Like I was at his age. And I don't think he has my luck."

"Next time there's a raid," Verrill promised, "I'll go. It will be good for all your men, not just for him in case he is wounded. It won't look as though you're favoring your son."

Ardelan grumbled something midway between throat and beard, and gave Verrill a gesture of dismissal. Verrill knew when to stop pressing a point; and he knew also that further words had not been needed.

In this he was right. He rode out with others who went to reconnoiter the dangerous valley, and there was no objection. He rode well. His presence was good for the morale of the raiders. And while he caught no sight of Dawson, he won prestige from supposedly having come to the frontier camps to get a shot at his enemy. Actually, he rather hoped that he would not have any such chance to settle the feud . . . it would be much more satisfactory to have Dawson witness his return to Venus with the Fire of Skanderbek.

And of an evening, when he was at home with Falana, she would sit with him as he watched Venus hanging low over the rimrock, white and splendid; she was finishing her term as evening star. And the sight of that far-off globe made him more than homesick. It accentuated his feeling of remoteness and of exile, and at the same time made him uneasy and uncomfortable, as though he and his Terrestrian redhead were somehow under Linda's eyes.

And he was afraid lest Falana read his thoughts. The longer he stayed, the harder it would be to leave; for in spite of his having come with fraudulent intent, he had done enough good to these barbarians to have become attached to them.

Meanwhile, the sooner Venus became the morning star, the better he would like it.

V

AT LAST CAME THE NIGHT when he felt sure that Kwangtan's search for the bones of Skanderbek had become such a fixed habit that the priest would be ranging further and further afield, leaving the shrine unguarded for an ever-lengthening period. The length of Kwangtan's absence was the measure of Verril's head-start.

As he set out for his goal, he said to himself, "When the ola devil misses the ruby, and then hears I'm gone, he'll likely

play foxy and cook up a yarn about my having taken it back to the gods. He couldn't be so dumb as to admit he was out wandering when he should have been guarding the shrine . . . I've done a reasonable number of other miracles since I brought Falana's nephew back from the dead . . . so if he's smart, he'll invent another miracle, and that will make it nice for Falana. . ."

And so, all at ease, he rode boldly from the walled enclosure. The guards, assuming he was going out on a case, settled back after greeting him, and drew their sheepskin coats closer about them.

Nearing the shrine, he left his horse in the shadow of a limestone ledge, to proceed afoot. He had to make sure that Kwangtan was actually away.

Stealthily, he made the most of rocks and shadows to cover his advance. The gurgling overflow of the spring combined with the whining of the wind to make a curtain of sound. He was quite near the spot from which, unseen, he could look in and see if Kwangtan was there, when he heard a disturbance which gave him all the answer he needed.

Kwangtan was not abroad, hunting a dead man's bones. He was instead choking, gasping for breath; in his struggle, he knocked down some pottery, judging from the clatter.

The sounds, and the way the old man had been scrambling about by night, exploring ravines and caverns, exposing and overtaxing himself, told the story. He had come to the end of his crooked rope.

This was perfect. It had worked far better than Verrill had anticipated. Just sit and wait for silence and the finish.

But another ingredient took effect. Verrill's own long-sustained pretense of being a doctor drove him forward against his best interest. After two paces taken in a helpless daze, he was no longer compulsion-driven and bewildered; he ran, and with his kit. He had brought it with him, from force of habit as much as for making a show for the benefit of whomsoever he might encounter along the way to the border.

As he knelt beside his patient, Verrill concluded that Kwangtan's heart had been cutting up tricks; though with exposure and worry, other complications might have set in. He got his vials and his hypo and set to work.

Of a sudden, he knew that he was not alone with his patient. Startled, he glanced about.

FALANA was in the doorway, and with her two of the guards. They held her by the arms. She had a bundle of something wrapped up in a shawl. Her face showed only impatience and annoyance at their stupidity. Their faces were still changing; the growth of understanding and the accepting of a new idea had not yet erased suspicion.

The sight of the trio gave Verrill the story, before any could speak: Falana, sensing what he planned, had packed up a bundle and had set out after him; and the guards, even though not getting the entire point, had suspected that the doctor was up to the very trick of which he had been accused. Falana had from the start been a hostage, at least a bond sufficiently strong to guarantee his good behavior. Thus the sight of her apparently preparing to follow him into the night had aroused all the suspicions which his work had lulled.

Falana said, "The poor fellow's half starved, Verrill! And shivering from cold! Let go of me, you blockheads—he's busy and I've got to give him a hand."

She plopped her bundle on the floor, brought out a small pot, and set to work heating water over the sacred flame.

"If you don't like it, get some brush," she told the guards, "and I'll stop the sacrilege."

Blinking owlishly, they obeyed.

When they returned to kindle a fire on the floor, she had dried meat in the pot. "Here, hold this!" she directed, and taking a heavy cape from the bundle, she blanketed the patient. Next she drew the shawl about his head and shoulders. Whatever else she may have had in the bundle, Verrill did not know, for she had very deftly wadded the odds and ends into a shirt and had tucked the lot under the priest's head, for a pillow.

When Kwangtan responded to treatment and regained consciousness, he did not have any idea as to what had happened, or why people were gathered about him. But he swallowed some of the broth Falana offered him.

The guards explained, "The doctor knew you were in trouble."

Falana nodded. "He awakened suddenly and told me to follow when I had this and that gathered together. The gods talk to him. Now that you've had your fill of snooping, suppose you go on about your business!"

They went, leaving Verrill and Falana to sit up with the priest until he was out of danger.

Within the hour, Verrill could have ridden off with the Fire of Skanderbek. Instead, he made apologies to himself; he could not rob a patient, or even collect his fee before he had really earned it.

SEVERAL DAYS PASSED, and word of Verrill's having heard the voice of the gods and so having gone to the shrine in time to save Kwangtan gave him an enormous boost in prestige. He had the priest at least halfway on the road to recovery when a courier brought news of another outbreak on the border. He hesitated to leave his patient, and decided to wait until the warring tribesmen made actual contact. As nearly as he could analyze the report, both sides were still scouting, skulking, maneuvering into positions suitable for the seizure of, or the defense of, the valley that Ardelan claimed as his own.

There would not be a serious clash until both sides had completed their infiltration whereby each planned to catch the other off guard, and so precipitate a panic the result of which would be relatively few casualties and a great deal of loot in the form of stampeded or abandoned or lost animals.

These barbarians, Verrill told himself, had a warfare far more civilized than had been that of The War, and also, a lot more sensible—there was a result to show for the effort exerted, and a profit instead of a mutual loss.

He decided to stay with his patient, and then by dint of hard riding join Ardelan's son when there was immediately impending need.

Falana said, "You're making a mistake. Now is your chance."

Just that way: with no build up at all. And she was right, for he needed no explanation of her meaning. He knew all of a sudden that she had tuned in on all his unspoken debates with himself. He and Kwangtan were supposed to be able to talk with the gods. That was pure nonsense. The gift was largely a feminine monopoly. Falana undoubtedly knew all about Linda, instead of merely about the Venusian Domes.

Verrill answered, "I can't rob a patient. If he dies or gets well, then it will be different. . ."

Falana shrugged, and for no apparent reason, moved a bundle wrapped up in a cape. "Suit yourself, Verrill, but you are letting your luck wear thin. If you want it this way, though, I'll be ready whenever you are."

"You were all ready the other night?"

"Of course. And when the guardsmen caught me, I was scared silly. I don't know what would have happened if that old devil hadn't been at death's door. Now is your chance. . . . It won't ever be better."

Falana was right, so very right, yet Verrill balked. He mounted up, with his medical kit, and with a pair of pistols thrust into his sash.

He was worried, and worn down. Tending to Kwangtan, and within reaching distance of the ruby, had been difficult. Worse yet, there was the problem created by Falana. Whenever he convinced himself that once back in the Venusian Domes, he would forget the Terrestrian girl, his argument went into reverse: and he knew that regardless of distance, the bond could not be broken in fact. Then, pursuing the endless debate from its other alternative, neither could he remain an exile from Venus, and stay away from Linda by any choice of his own.

And all this went with him, oppressing him as he rode toward the new valley which would so enrich Ardelan's people.

VI

VERRILL WAS STILL WELL short of his destination when he heard a rider behind him: a horse blowing and wheezing, ridden nearly to death, yet carrying on. He wheeled about. It was Falana who had overtaken him.

"You little idiot, go back home!"

"I won't."

"You will, and now."

"Yes, if you carry me back."

"What's the idea? You know I'm coming back, and you know there's a lot of trouble ahead, where I'm bound for."

"I'm going anyway."

And then her horse collapsed. Verrill had no magic to restore it to life. "Now I can't go back," she announced, contentedly, as though she had foreseen this decisive detail.

She mounted up and rode behind him.

From time to time, Verrill halted, and cocked an ear. Thus far, he had heard no firing. He had seen no signal fires on the crests that were dark against the stars. The way became harder, and until moonrise, difficult to pick.

When the first half-glow whitened the limestone slopes and the high snowcaps, the mountain world became a maze of illusion and shifting glamour.

Finally, Verrill's horse sniffed the air, and would have whinnied, had he not checked him in time. As he paused, he wondered whether Falana's presence, the night he had saved Kwangtan, would be sufficient precedent for her accompanying him into the field; or whether instead suspicion would be aroused.

He had reined in at the edge of a deep shadow. Before he could make up his mind, Falana said, "Turn around and see—I've got it."

As he twisted about, the horse shifted, moving out of the shadow and into light strong enough for him to see the ruby she had in her hand. It collected enough of the glow to pulse and flame as though in its own right. One good look he got, and then she had knotted it again into the end of her scarf and thrust it securely between her breasts

"I'm going with you to the home of the gods," Falana said, "and if they, your people, don't like me, they can do what they want with me. But I'm going."

However she had made away with the gem, there would be the devil to pay when Kwangtan missed it. His exclamation of dismay made her add, "He won't make any trouble. He smothered under his sheepskin robe."

Verrill preferred not to ask whether she meant that the invalid had himself done this, accidentally, or whether, aroused by her prowling, his protest had been stifled, quickly and silently, by a solid armful of a woman who knew precisely what she had to do to save herself. Instead of being horrified by a very logical suspicion, he dismissed the query: for in either event, he had no longer any choice concerning Falana. She had made the bond so strong that wherever he went, he would take her. There was no more clash between him and Dawson. The bond that had attached him to Linda had been cut. Whether by smothering the fire priest, or merely robbing the fire god, Falana had done well for herself.

After a silence, he said, "There's someone just ahead. My horse scented them. Whoever they are, they may have caught some sign of us. You get down and wait. The sight of you is likely to make the outposts think I'm leaving the tribe. And now is no time for suspicion!"

"I know another way around, and out," Falana said. "A hard trail, but we can make it."

"Whoever's ahead, up there, might start wondering. All I have to do is go ahead and identify myself, and then go my way."

"You can make some excuse for coming back this way," she said, and slipped to the ground. "I'll wait."

HE RODE ON, at a walk. Ten to one, Falana had smothered Kwangtan, not out of malice, but simply because he would have kept her from following Verrill. Since Verrill could not reject her, he had to accept the act as his own, however heavy the burden. He shrank from the very suspicion of the deed, and at the same time, his eyes were tear-blinded from realization of her devotion, so much more reckless

than any Venusian woman's could have been.

A horse whinnied. Verrill's mount answered. And before Verrill could hail the dimly-discerned rider, revealed when he rounded a sharp curve, he knew that this was an ambush; the recognition between horses had come because the animals ahead had been stolen from Ardelan's herd.

Despite his disadvantage, knowledge came before he had made himself too good a target.

That split-second sensing gave him a chance with his pistol. He spurred in, shooting. A wild shot grazed him. The enemy stampeded, as though from the sudden fear that they had tricked themselves; it was as though his boldness had convinced them that he had a large party at his back.

In half a dozen hoofbeats, he was through. One horse was down, and struggling. Something thumped into the ravine, far below. There was a brief shower of rocks, and the diminishing clatter of hoofs.

Only two had lain in wait: and one was bound for home.

Verrill reined in sharply, and called to Falana. She answered, and knowing it was all over, came toward him at a walk.

Verrill was badly shaken. Falana, knowing that he would be, was giving him a welcome moment to himself. This was his first taste of combat.

The enemy, sprawled among the rocks, groaned and cursed, as though shock had until that moment held him unable to make a sound. This was something familiar to Verrill, for in his way, he was now a doctor in fact—a man was a man, whether friend or enemy. And this one, being a man he had wounded, evoked his response more readily than had Kwangtan.

Verrill dismounted. The man in the shadows mumbled and choked; the man's horse lay dead; and approaching his own handiwork shook Verrill's composure. Worse yet, he should not dally. No telling who might have heard the shots, who might be hurrying to the scene. But he could not abandon a patient, though this might become a dangerous business, with the Fire of Skanderbek taken from the shrine—

Three sounds blended. Verrill understood each, but too late.

"Now see if you'll get the ruby!" the patient challenged, triumphantly, and fired.

Venusian accent and intonation; pistol blast; and then, as Dawson, unwounded, bound up to take Verrill's horse, came the third sound: Falana's cry.

Her approach, afoot, had tricked Dawson. She was on him from the rear before he sensed his danger. He swayed, he choked, and he would have flung her aside, hut for the knife with which she finished him. Stab and slash; and he was dead before she could crawl free of him to go to Verrill.

Dawson, living with the enemy tribe, had learned raiding tricks, and had known how to tempt an enemy by offering hope of plunder. By feigning a mortal wound, he had played the game as his brothers in raiding would have played it: and at the most he could not have hoped for more than a horse, and the weapons of the supposedly greedy and reckless one whose loot hunger had driven out ordinary caution. Moonlight on Verrill's face had given Dawson his moment of triumphant recognition—and then, sudden death which he might otherwise have avoided.

The irony of all this passed through Verrill's mind during the moments which elapsed before he could recover sufficiently from shock to speak. Teeth chattering from the deadly chill which took hold of him, he said, "Physician, heal thyself."

He knew he was beyond mending. He knew also that he had long drawn-out hours of agony ahead of him. Falana knew, without being told, that she would soon be alone; that she would never board the long gleaming shell on the take-off ramp of the trading-post to go with him to the home of the gods. Since he was shivering, she wrapped a shawl about him, and waited for him to tell her what else to do.

THE SHIFT OF THE MOON thinned the shadows that had tricked first one and then another of those who had met in that rocky angle. Verrill pointed to the kit, and told her how to load the hypo. He had done this himself, many times, for those he knew he could not

save. They lasted just as long, but avoided consciousness and pain. This had won him esteem. And now he was to learn how good his work had been.

His vision began to play tricks, and his memory also, but he was sure that the white orb shimmering, rising from behind a distant crest, was Venus, beginning her term as morning star. Seen through that thin mountain air, Venus was an expanding splendor, and memories danced: memories of Linda, blurred with the memories of all other Venusian women, perfumed and sleek and all bejewelled. They were shapes of the mind, rather than a semblance to the eye; for at the same time, he saw clearly where he was, and who was beside him. And he was glad that it was Falana.

Falana peeled off her jacket and blouse. She cut a long strand of hair, and despite the biting wind that lashed her from shoulder to hip, she shaped a loop, using two long hairs to suspend the Fire of Skanderbek from about her throat.

She knelt, posed by sure instinct, head flung back, and the monstrous ruby all ablaze against her white skin. The lower end of the six-sided crystal barely dipped into the shadow of her breasts.

The Venusian images of memory were blotted out, and with them, the great white orb as well. Falana became all women in one, yet remaining all the while wholly herself.

Verrill's face, or her own instinct, told her when to end the tableau. She slipped into her jacket and went into the shadow beside him. She caught him in her arms, to pillow him better than had the rocks and the saddle-bags that had softened them. And then Verrill went on his long road, and entirely content, for he had in his way done with the Fire of Skanderbek as he had planned.

Not long after sunrise, a handful of Ardelan's men came along from the new valley. They had routed the raiders. Somewhere, they told Falana, there had been several shots, which had alerted them.

"The shots Verrill fired," they concluded, having seen and understood from the face of things.

She gave them no time to wonder about her presence. "He was going to stay for days and days with the people Ardelan was sending into the new valley. I made him take me with him. So I was here when he killed his enemy, the one with whom he had a feud."

Despite their grief at losing their doctor, the mountaineers forgot none of their ways. Methodically, they took the gear from the dead horse, and stripped the dead enemy, leaving nothing but vulture bait. And among the things they found in his clothes was the Fire of Skanderbek.

"The gods told Verrill," Falana said. "But not all, and not in time. Only enough to send him where he would meet the thief."

They studied his face, and one said, "It is clear that the gods welcomed him when he took their road."

Later, Ardelan himself joined them. He heard, he saw, and then he said, "We will bury Verrill by those others who have guarded the Fire of Skanderbek. He saved many lives for us, as Skanderbek did in the old days."

And this was done, with no one wondering at Kwangtan's death. Some said that the spirit of the priest had guided Verrill to overtake the looter. Falana heard the legend grow, and could not tell what Ardelan really thought. Whatever his thought, the chief kept it to himself, until, days later, he said to Falana, "Verrill's son will be a great man among us, to watch the Fire of Skanderbek, and teach us the way of the gods."

Which seemed reasonable enough to Falana, who had command of more miracles than any man.

(*Continued from p. 2*)

The Vestal illustration for WHICH OF THE DEMI-MONDE SEES? in particular, and all his others in general, are among the best illustrations I have ever had the pleasure of wishing for. This boy is improving by bounding leaps, and I'll take his work over Finlay any day. His attention to detail is amazing, and when he visualizes a scene, it is really *there*.

About WOTDS—please, no more straight adventure yarns, especially not when Celtic, Greek, Persian and Cretan word-derivations abound in them. A good story, if your adrenal glands are beginning to lose the old zing, but not Stf. Not even SA. Thalassocracy indeed! Craig must be an erudite man. (This does not mean I am, by the way. By the wildest coincidence, someone had mentioned that Thalassa is Greek for sea just four hours before I bought the magazine.)

TIGER BY THE TAIL—Good, good, good. (The broad's legs are a trifle heavy.) *This* is Science-Adventure, by Cracky! (An obscure Kalganian Diety, worshipped on alternate leap-years by hammer-toed people named Harris or Benutti.) Shulman, are you there?

TASK TO LUNA—Inconsequential, but good. Shoot Mayan, or any other illustrator irresponsible enough to illustrate surprise endings. This is a real gripe to me, ever since Cartier murdered THE FIGURE.

POISON PLANET—With another ending, or the same one more skillfully handled, Oberfield would have had an equivalent of MARS IS HEAVEN on his hands. Pity. Vestal again. Ole!

GUEST EXPERT—Terrific. What's the point? What did the Martian have to gain? I can guess, because it's been done a hundred times, but this is still a helluva way to go about it. Orban did a very nice job, but keep him on stories like this. He's too artistic to do a good job illustrating blood and thunder. So help me, it's true. Check the Thrilling mags. You'll see what I mean.

SAFETY MARGIN—Good. Logic's a little strained, to my mind, but all right. Comment on illustration same as above.

MARTIAN NIGHTMARE—You said it for me. "It was weird, incredible, it was a horrible dream . . . but it was real. Or was it?" Vestal, Vestal, Vestal, three and a tiger.

THE VIZIGRAPH—Nice to see the old cut back. Who did it? I collect illustrator's names, and this boy has a style that appeals to me. (*Joe Doolin. — Ed.*)

Ganley—English—Calkins, in that order, of course. English was short, but, by Gar, that was the funniest thing I've read in the Vizi for a long time.

Dianetics — *Oh no!* Oh yes. Herewith my two cents. (Is this deduetible?) A hell of a lot of people have been conning and pro-ing all over the back yard, and it is getting pretty messy back there. Shaddap, dammit! In three years, or thereabouts, somebody will be qualified to make the first intelligent remarks, and until then, will you all quietly die or something, and let us poor preclears decide for ourselves. I wouldn't take Blish's, Lowndes', Wickham's or anybody else's word on a thing like this, and that includes Rollo May, too. I paid Doubleday Bookstores my four plus tax, and I have been to college, taken the psych courses, and I can state, at this moment, that I have as much qualification to publish an analytical statement as the left-hand Ubangi in the latest African newsreel. For that matter, so does L. Ron Hubbard. This thing may be bigger than fire or the wheel—and by the way, I understand that's the publisher's blurb, not LRH's—but I am not going to shoot my cookies over it until I have examined it as something completely unrelated to any other discovery. I am bored stiff with questions as to where Hubbard cribbed what. I do not care one whit. When I have decided whether or not it works, or to what degree, I shall see fit to flap my tonsils. I suggest you inflated parlor critics do the same before you bend the keys on your rapidly rupturing typewriters. And another thing—ah, the hell with it, you'll go on doing it anyway. Pfui on you!

Good magazine you got here, Bix. Keep it up. Sorry I scragged so much room—cut wherever you feel like it. You would anyway, wouldn't you. Dog, you. Nice though, in a wire-haired sort of way.

Blessings on you,

THE INIMICAL ALIEN

A. J. BUDRYS
220 Shoreward Dr.,
Great Neck, L. I., N. Y.

Not so Inimical, A. J.—let's see that eggshell.

OH, MY ACHING BLUE PENCIL!

N. 5028 Walnut,
Spokane, 12, Washington

DEAR MUD TURTLE:

I am writing this for the same reason everybody else writes to the visicrapper. That one prime reason is—aw, hell, everybody knows what it is!!! I want an original as bad, if not worse, than any other gutter-rat that lowers him/herself to the grimy station of SCIENCE-FICTION FAN. In order to grab the votes, I gotta write a piece of shining prose that will catch the eye.

I gotta compete against all the big-name fans who have a higher education than 3 lousy years in a Podunk H. S. I gotta make sure I offend no fan. I will not say I am glad that for once an isb of P. S. is not polluted with RAY BRADBURY! I will not say I hate the guts of the blue pencil that will consign this paper to the furnace (are blue pencils allowed to vote?) and flaming oblivion. I will not say I wish all the loud-mouthed (blue pencil here) who slam Dianetics would soak their heads in a barrel of Portland cement.

Instead, I gotta think up a angle which is new. I cannot say I don't want an orig, therefore making all the 'crapper-parasites voting for me to get one. I cannot screw up my typer keys so they jerky outy misspelly wordy, because that's been did afore. I cannot send in a paper done up with big math because I don't know the tenth place logarithm table by heart and/or know how to do binomial quadratics (thank you L. Ron H.).

While I waste paper, I is endeavoring to think, which statement in itself is a gigantic laff or six.

Is Lin Carter a Male or Female? That seems

to be a big little question. I settle all. L. C. is a neuter! Thar, by (blue pencil here).

I once had a pet Martian male and female, but they got to digging in heavily on my larder of editors, and I fed them to Jim the Fish, my understudy in the art of cooking editors to please the palate. I have Jerome the Bixby on my shelf, only he don't know it, do you, J. B. Drexel?

I is sorry I said—no, I didn't say that yet, by (blue pencil here) did I? Oh, by the way, I and I have a fanzine in the making. It is to be called: FAN FAIRY. Whooops! Blue pencil back there! The price is to be very cheap for FAN FAIRY. Only one editor a copy. Got any old editors laying around in the closet gathering dust?

Describe yourself, Cherry bomb! I got you pegged as a guy who don't know a mashie from a racket (and I don't mean the editor racket) or anchor man. You is very lazy. You has a dozen gross secretaries, and six old wore-out fans as Eunuchs. You has a wife, and loves her as much as you do your 1728 secretaries. You spend your time making big slashes acrost letters wit' your blew pencil.

I warn all fanzine men not to fail sending me no copys of no fanzine if they sees this in printte, which I doubts. Make a deal wit' 'cha, Bixquick. If you print this I will give you back Paul Payne's left arm, all that was left after Jim the Fish dined.

I will quit this before Jim the Fish gets vicios, (how the hell ya all spell vishus?) and gnaws on Bixby's head, which, of course, is the soup-bone.

But before I close the door for another 2 monthy, I'd like all fanz who are interested in various (bow you spell varius?) methods of ralsing hell in the present theories (how you all spell theries?) of rocket propulsion, and who like to rassel (that the way you all spell wrestle)....

Never yours, always mine,
DONALD J. LANOUE, ESQ.

OUR DUMB AUTHORS . . .

546 Ellis
Wichita 9, Kansas

DEAR EDITOR:

Well, I know I am going to make a lot of fans happy, and yourself as well. I spotted the latest PLANET on the newsstand and couldn't bring myself to read it, so in all fairness I can't write any more letters to the magazine.

For years PLANET has been in a rut, and I bought it mainly because it amused me to see the names the fans called me for knowing a little more about history than they did. After you took it over I thought there might be a change, but you have dropped back into the slump.

Your authors seldom know anything about their subjects. They will mention a known law of science and blithely contradict or misuse it. They do not even know simple arithmetic and contradict their own stories. If they use history they know nothing about it. They attempt to use psychology without the least understanding of what makes people tick.

It doesn't make any difference what the subject is, they are absolutely ignorant of it. As a result, most of the stories stink. Your readers make fun of westerns, yet the majority of westerns are better written and better plotted than most science-fiction stories. Perhaps you had better hire a bunch of western writers.

You have to read the stories you purchase, and if you don't care to take the trouble to insist that your authors write better stories or fix up the ones they have written, then I don't care enough to buy the magazine.

I really like science-fiction—and have obtained a lot of pleasure in the past from it, so I hope I will not be absent too long.

Lastly, to those fans who have landed on me for stating facts a six-year-old child ought to know, you have not defeated me, but I see no profit in discussing anything with people who cannot remember a news-event over a twenty-four hour period and who, instead of digging up facts to confront you, land on you with such cries as, "Nazi! Communist! Bigot! Blasphemer! You have profaned the sacred name of Roosevelt!" and the like.

And I used to believe that fans read science-fiction because they liked to think!

EDWIN SIGLER

Hm . . . I'd be interested to see enough specific examples cited to cover that sweeping accusation of auctorial idiocy. Always willing to learn, that's us.—Ed.

PEAKS OUT ON LOVE INTREST

1420 Jerome Avenue
New York 52, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR,

I hope what Mr. Chabot says isn't true. But I guess that it won't happen to me, since I'm not 12 years old yet. Anyway I like the January issue very much.

THE WITCH OF THE DEMON SEAS was real thrilling. The only thing I did not like about it was that there was too much love intrest. I am not interested in love intrest.

TIGER BY THE TAIL was also very good. I like that kind of story very much.

I didn't like TASK TO LUNA. I didn't understand it.

POISON PLANET was real scary. I had to read it twice to finally get the ending. But I liked it very much. The picture was real good, too.

I didn't like SAFETY MARGIN very much. I don't think it was fair for Bremner to kill McCall.

MARTIAN NIGHTMARE was real auful. Don't print any more like that.

I wish you wouldn't have such sexy girls on your covers. I have a very hard time getting my mother to let me buy PLANET with those covers. Sometimes she make me tare the covers off.

About which was the best letter. I think Mr. Blishes was the best. He writes a very good letter.

Next Raoul D. Kyne, and after him Mr. Chabot.

I hope a lot of people do send me things, I really love to get a lot of mail.

Yours truly,
JAMES A. PEAK

P. S. This is the first time I ever wrote to a magazine like yours.

OFF . . . TO DINNER, THAT IS

1521 So. Holt Ave.
Los Angeles, Calif.

DEAR JEROME:

In the past couple of years that I have been reading PLANET STORIES, I've found that very few of the fans' classic epistles come from Los Angeles. Being a stalwart Angeleno I aim to make your predominantly New York readers realize that you also sell your mag on the western side of the continent.

Knowing your insane hatred for lengthy letters (increased costs of paper and ink no doubt, Tavish MacBixby) I'll come directly to the point of this letter—the stories. Unusual, what?

Win—POISON PLANET.

Superb, excellent, moving, realistic! Fine plot, well written. Also the illo was terrific. Just look at poor McBride's face and all those other cannabalistic slobs brooding around out there going insane! Heh, heh. And no happy ending! Goot, goot.

Place—MARTIAN NIGHTMARE.

Gad, what gore! Well written, enjoyable, but the plot was slightly weak. For example, if everyone was at war when did they have time to have babies, hence, in time, new soldiers? Also, why so many spare parts for only fifty Oligarchs? Ponder, lads. (*They lived hard—Ed.*)

Sbow—GUEST EXPERT.

Tough decision but I guess the unusual twist in the plot noses out—

Fourth—WITCH OF THE DEMON SEAS. Good reading, but these sword-science fiction stories are getting much too common in PLANET. Two in this issue alone. Stuff like that belongs in JUNGLE STORIES or something on that line. Let me congratulate Vestal on his fine art in this one, though. Especially the inside illo on pages 20 and 21. Man, that guy is good.

Fifth—TASK TO LUNA. Not bad but a stale plot.

Sixth—SAFETY MARGIN. Novel but for some reason it did not make the grade for me.

Seventh—TIGER BY THE TAIL. This is deserving of last place. Plot too stereotyped and action too slow. It's only the action anyway that holds a story of this type together.

Now, let's talk about the cover. A favorite subject with me. (Snarl!) Very colorful. Only trouble is that I can't tell it apart from the others that PLANET has featured in the past couple years. They all look alike. This one is supposed to illustrate WITCH OF THE DEMON SEAS, right? You realize, of course, that it doesn't. Oh well, wby change your policy just because of me?

La Vizi generally good, but WOW! Some of those lengthy scientific discourses. Reads like a medical journal.

So I'm through. My beefs have been registered under PLANET's colossal file marked "B." (That's not for Bixby either, you vain fool!) I shall now step into my space cruiser, the Venus II, and embark on my journey to my ship's namesake. I hope to be in time for dinner. Bye now.

Disgustingly yours,
CARL SCHEMMERLING

6-2125 . . . AND 25¢ NOW

2962 Santa Ana St,
South Gate, Calif.

DEAR BIX:

The world is thundering to ruin around me, there are a million jobs and twenty-eleven letters to be written, but I got to find out something. How come I get a card from your subscription dept. saying my sub is out, and a new sub cost $1.50. I ask you how come? You is bi-monthly now, 6 times a year . . . You still cost the same old happy 20¢@. So 6 x 20¢ makes $1.20, or it did wben I went to school. (Honist I did. I studied at home, but still I went.) You better look into this . . . Oh say, Is Maureen Garthwaite still around the office, or did Paul take her with him? I came near winning her in place of a McWilliams drawing, once. I still think Paul was greedy . . .

While here I might as well mention that the current issue was pretty fair . . . It got a 6.2125 average rating, on my 1-10 rating scale. Better than average . . . The two lads that lifted you np there were Anderson and Oberfield. Both of whom are very good at characterasation . . . TIGER BY THE TAIL was as complex a story as your senior compedators could ask for, and it looked rigbt good here. I'd rate Anderson the best "new" writer of 1950.

POISON PLANET used an old setting for a rather grim new twist . . . Well not new, it's as old as the thin coating we call civilization, but it isn't used in the pulps very much. I think he did an exalect job too. There were no "falce hero" or the rest of the corn that usual fills yours, and most of your compeditors stories. Stories about starvation come a lot closer home to everyone, than stories of battles with far galaxcies . . . More, please.

Also a short bow to Bryce Walton, for his good story.

As for tbe letters, I'd say the best were by Carter, Ganley and Chabot.

The exchange on Dianetics is probably the best fight the Viz has had in months. I, personally have seen this all run over so many times by local fans that it didn't excite me, but for the mag it is good. I'm a fairly quite "wate-an-seeer." There are many things about it I find interesting, but the actions of Hubbard and those working under him does a lot to undermind any fath one migbt have in the subject. Let's face it, So. California is famed as the land of the crackpot and the cultest, and Hubbard is using all the tricks in the game. It is really tobad, if Dianetics is a fake, becouse the world needs something like it. As a friend pointed out, more and more people throughout the world are feeling the need for some sort of mental tharaphy. Few of them can afford $25 an hour for a good psychoanalyist. So if they could plug down their $4, take the book home and work on each other, it would be great. Fatb can do a lot of things. Fath is doing a lot of remarkable things, beconse I haven't *seen* Dianetics do anything yet.

Ramon Van Rensburg must really be hard up for magz if he is still getting copies with my letters in them. I've been so tied up with clnbs like YOUNG FANDOM (an org. for the new fans) that I haven't had time to write. If I didn't review PLANET every two months at LASFS I don't know if I'd get time to read it even.

Oh . . . Tell Kyne, that while Ackerman is one of my good friends, I don't think he is the *cutest* thing in fandom. There are sarvel that come to mind, but there is a certen assistent Editor of one of PLANET'S smaller compeditors, namely Bea Mahaffey, that isn't so bad. Right, Bix? (*An understatement, Rick!—Ed.*)

Yours,
RICK SNEARY

A POME . . .

4 Whipple Ave.
Cranston, R. I.

BIX:

This morning, much to my chagrin,
I found the PLANET STORIES in.
I parted with my twenty cents,
Expecting—as he who soon repents
A foolish act—to find it lost.
But, lo! I find the coin was tossed
Upon the counter for a cause.
I give to you my great applause.
'Tis fine, 'tis great, your mag at last
My careful scrutiny has passed.
The art is fair—it's even good;
I liked the tales; you knew I would.
Story one was SAFETY MARGIN.
TIGER close behind was bargin'.
Followed next by GUEST EXPERT
And TASK TO LUNA. Now the dirt.
The WITCH she stunk; on this I'll swear.
The same for Walton's dull NIGHTMARE.
The PLANET POISON little better—
Though not as dry, still not much wetter.
The Vizigraph was quite superior.
Why must it stay at your mag'a posterior?
I read it first, as so do all,
But have to all the pages maul,
To reach the second letter there.
I'm sure by now I'm in your hair.
I'll now commence with my bouquets.
For Gibson, Stewart, Ganley—Rayyy's.
Of David English I'll say nothing.
I fear that now your mouth is frothing,
For if you weren't insane before,
This poem has made you that or more.
This work will not in print appear.
You see, dear Ed, you wouldn't dare.

Poetically yours,
OSCAR HIGGINS

. . . AND A NOTHER

Ballard Vale
Mass.

DEAR JERRY:

How dumb dost thou think
all your readers were borun,
To stand for your character,
aptly named Corun?
Alas, we are wearied; alack,
we are worun;
Our nerves and our patience
are tattered and torun.
Reforum, O Bixby, reforum
or burun—
The mildest of worums
is able to turun.

Indignantly,
ALMA HILL

SHABASH!

Box 8023
University Station
Knoxville, Tennessee

DEAR JERRY,

Informality, that's what I like. Reckon as how, since this is the first time I have had the temerity to address you, I should get more formal, but I note the correspondents whose letters you print are invariably pleasantly friendly, albeit usually a little whacky—perhaps that is why I drummed up the necessary intestinal fortitude to relieve a long standing frustration by addressing an editor on equal terms. Of course, recent close attention to the cup that cheers may have something to do with it . . . huh?

I gather from a perusal of the Vizigraph of the Jan. ish that PS has gone into a bi-monthly production . . . is this actually so? Whazzat? Where've I been? How come I didn't know about that? Well, I ben oot in a furrin' land part of this summer—I think the folks thereabouts called it Californy or some such stf name—and I never could screw up the necessary courage to walk down the streets with such fine examples of art work under my arm; yeah, I think I saw one, maybe two copies—guess I just didn't know the right bookstores, drug stores, or what have you. IF it is true, however, that PS has come into the fold of bi-monthly mags, I have but one thing to say: shabash!

A little while ago—I think it was in '45 or thereabouts—I read my first issue of PS, the one containing the tale about transplanted egos, called, if I recall correctly, which I may not, "Survival," and since then I have been an avid PS fan, and an equally fanatic antogonist to those who would reduce to nothing but a lot of scientific mumbo-jumbo the fair field of stf. I, to be perfectly frank, read stf for relaxation and as an escape, and I like full well the psychic distance, engendered by immediate recognition of the locus of a story being far away and impossible. Such stories as REBEL OF VALKYR, TIGER BY THE TAIL, and the already mentioned SURVIVAL have a definite place in stf for me; the pure adventure in a strange locale is one reason why I like PS so well. If I feel in the mood for science, I either go to a science fanatic or one of the stfs specializing in science; when I feel in the mood for adventure with a good spice of imagination (which is nearly all the time) I go to PS or one of two or three other good stfs, depending on which one I can get, that I have not already read. There is no feeling as despondent as that of wanting desperately a new ish of stf to read, going expectantly to the store, and finding nothing but well-thumbed and already-read copies staring with a sort of wistful expression at one . . .

Since every reader (well, almost) that writes you-all seems to have to have a try at evaluating the stories, I suppose I must make a stab at it: I thougbt all stories in vol. 4, No. 10, ish were good, with the exception of GUEST EXPERT: it left me with the feeling the Martian failed to live up to the agreement, otherwise it was quite well done. I liked TIGER BY THE TAIL especially, but then that's true of all the rest. Oh, well, reckon I am too easily pleased to be a critic, but then I don't pretend to be one.

See ya agin, somewhere, sometime, somehow.

BY, ya lucky critter! (Lucky to get rid of me so easily, that is. Shall I draw you a pittchure?)

J. W. LEAKE

TALE OF WOE

1675 Lincoln Place
Brooklyn, N. Y.

DEAR JEROME:

I really don't know if I should call you "dear," as my husband might object if this ever reaches print, but be that as it may, here is my tale of woe. My husband is a science-fiction fan of the first magnitude. He clutters up our bedroom, our living room, and our kitchen with old magazines, some of which he claims go back as far as 1926. He loves them more than me (had I known this before I married him, I assure you that would have been one wedding that never would have come to pass. But don't get me wrong—I love my husband, and there are times I believe he loves me). Now, I wonder if you think I have you pegged as a Mr. Agony character and am telling you should I leave my husband and elope with his magazines? . . . no, nothing like that.

I perchance decided, after 2½ long years, that I would try—by try, I mean read—one of the mags. So when my husband sent me down to the store to purchase all the latest mags, yours was amongst the rest—and I asked if I might read one. He was very nice about it. "Alright, you can read it, but don't fold the cover—hold it straight—be careful not to rip it, etc., etc—" So, taking my life in my hands, I proceeded to open the Jan. '51 issue. The first thing I read was the Vizigraph, and I was completely taken aback. My thoughts were, "What is this, a reincarnation of Joe Miller's Joke Book? Is this where all the aspiring Groucho Marxes unload their material at your expense?" And then I turned to the stories. After reading them all, the one I liked best was TASK TO LUNA, and I guess here is how I would rate the rest:

2—GUEST EXPERT, 3—POISON PLANET, 4—TIGER BY THE TAIL, 5—WITCH OF THE DEMON SEAS, 6—MARTIAN NIGHTMARE, 7—SAFETY MARGIN.

I dare now to sneak amongst my hubby's vaunted collection (ugh) and read a few more of of your swell PLANET STORIES, so I will close now and look forward to the future with PLANET STORIES both future and past.

Very truly yours,

MRS. MITZ SCHWARTZ

P. S. I really hope you publish this, to teach hubby a thing or two. Thanks again.

SAGA OF SKIN-SKIN

1104A Yonge St.
Toronto 5, Ontario

DEAR JB:

Knowing a good editor likes to hear from his writers now and again I pen herewith this account of how I met your top man the other day and what has befallen him since then.

It is all very unreal the way we meet. I am standing on Broadway one evening in front of Dryden Killkenny's Penny Arcade thinking what a nasty mess life in general is and trying vainly to get a slug back from a gum machine, when

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this guy pops his face onto the gum machine's mirror.

Naturally, I am very curious to know who this schlumpf is, as I am not a character who makes a practice of associating with just any kind of schlumpf, but I don't ask any questions, as the most you can get from asking questions along Broadway is a reputation for asking questions.

Turning, I behold a shaggy individual dressed in the weariest sort of cast-offs. "Look, bum—" I begin.

"Ah," he cuts in. "Then you do not recognize me. How fickle are the fingers of fate." He straightens himself slightly and arches an eyebrow to the sky. "I am Skin-Skin Remedy, the greatest stfan of all time!"

"Skin-Skin Rem—" I chokes.

"Yes," he smiles as a slight-of-hand artiste might smile at a bucolic hick. "I am me!"

Well, needless to say when I know who this schlumpf really is I am taken quite back. He is Skin-Skin Remedy the famous stfan who is called Skin-Skin not because he is skinny but because he is double skinny. He is a sad-looking schlumpf. I feel sorry for him and I ask him where he has been all these years since he retired from the occupation of being a full-time fan.

"Ah, it is a sad story," he groans. "To begin with I have known neither father nor mother. They both died years before I was born. My aunt who was extremely cruel raised me on science-fiction pulps and I grew up the lonely and unwanted child that I am to-day." Here he leans over and drips large salty tears on my shoulder.

"When I was only 27 my aunt passed away in a fit of apostrophe and left me alone in the huge world. I was already the top stfan of the day, but I realized sadly that I must retire. Somehow I had to make money in order to live."

By this time I must admit grudgingly that I am crying also and I tell Skin-Skin to go on with his heart-breaking narrative.

"I decided," he said, "to become a science-fiction writer. I retired to the sands of the Sahara and there I studied and applied myself so that some day I might write stories!"

"Good God!" I cried, lost in admiration.

He spits thrice. "To boot," he resumes, "I have revised the Koran. Here is my version. You will notice that I have ripped out pages 87 and 88. It is better that way." He thumbed to the spot and sure enough these pages were gone. I could see he was a great writer.

"And now I have returned. I have written science-fiction and I have been published." Skin-Skin reaches into his pocket with his indifferently-cleaned right hand and pulls out a copy of your mag, PLANET STORIES, which is coincidentally dated January, 1951. "I wrote this," he says modestly.

Naturally I will admit I was taken back and I ask him if he wrote it all, letters and everything. Skin-Skin blushes somewhat and replies that he did. "It's quite simple really," he says. "I took another issue and changed the names and places.

"But now to finish my saga. I made twenty-three cents for writing this and with this accumulated wealth I will again sally forth into the Sahara, there to sit and ponder and think. I have already made many thousand inventions from nature's bounteous supply of materials. My prize creation, the ultime lens, with which I am able to view the secrets of the universe, is made entirely from gravel." He spat again and I realized that Skin-Skin Remedy was truly a great man.

The next day the sun shines brightly and I ambles up Broadway but cannot find my bosom pal, Skin-Skin, so I naturally assume, dear editor, that the great man is off once more and that somewhere in the world even now he is sitting in the middle of his great inventions, preaching from his revised Koran, thinking, smiling and spitting.

DON HUTCHISON

MORE ON DIANETICS . . .

DEAR MR. BIXBY:

I have noted with interest the five columns of VIZIGRAPH you have given to letters from Wickham and Blish on the controversial subject of Dianetics. It seems only fair that some additional space be granted to a person who has studied Dianetics under Mr. Hubbard in his Los Angeles school. I attended the first course in professional auditing in this area, and by dint of hard work graduated with one of the rather rare certificates from the Hubbard Dianetic Research Foundation. I mention this so that you may be assured that I have some experience in the field, and perhaps investigate some of the following information.

In reference to Mr. Wickham's letter:

1) If certain things happen consistently, and laws can be formulated or discovered which adequately explain this consistency, and extrapolating from these laws new laws can be postulated which subsequently prove to be valid, where is the *un*science? The assertion that Ron Hubbard has dim awareness of what constitutes science is your cross to carry, and certainly not his to disprove.

2) I have worked about 350 hours with Dianetic processes, and of this time much has been spent with persons who know nothing of Dianetics, or Dianetic terms. Some of these have been 8 & 9 year old children. My observation is that I get *better* results with a person *who does not know what reactions are to be expected!*

3) Hubbard will admit readily that much work leading toward the basic discoveries and formulation of Dianetics was done by others. But he does not admit that they made the discovery of the reactive mind as different from the subconscious in that it contains only data recorded during moments of pain and "unconsciousness" and is the sole source of aberration in the human mind. He does not admit that others evolved Dianetic techniques.

And now Mr. Blish:

I am truly sorry to hear James Blish say in CAPITAL LETTERS that only experienced persons should experiment with Dianetics. I do agree that only those persons who are well versed in the processes of the field should *EXPERIMENT*, but feel that such a statement is potentially misleading to many people. Through my experience I have found that anyone is capable of using Dianetics if he will do three things, and these are:

1) Study carefully and thoroly the theories and techniques as described in the book with the elimination of the one to seven count by merely

saying, "Close your eyes," and avoiding using *random* repeater technique.

2) Follow the rules closely and not mixing the techniques with other methods and ideas.

3) Stick to it, not giving up, for success will surely come to those who persevere.

In conclusion I find the question, "Where is the evidence?" *I* have evidence, for I have worked with Dianetics using the above three rules. Do you have evidence? And if not, why not? You can get it the way I did.

Thank you.

ROBERT L. SEWELL

New York, N. Y.

DEAR JERRY:

I am already familiar with the claims for Dianetics which Mr. Sewell makes, including the claim of the possession of evidence. They are the same claims as those made by Mr. Hubbard and his associates. I do not find them any more convincing coming from Mr. Sewell than I did when I first encountered them. I wish some one person associated with Dianetics would actually come forth with some of this evidence they all claim to have.

As for Mr. Sewell's three rules, I regret to say that I find them a poor substitute for scientific method. Mr. Sewell's rules tell me a good deal about his concepts of validity, however. I should like to remark also that perseverance in a half-understood activity leads more frequently to catastrophe than it does to success.

JAMES BLISH

SALAMI I. A.

DEAR MR. BIXBY:

Greetings and conglomerations to youse. Aho. Aho. There's another Sneary in the making. (Sounds of sobs and groans coming from ye ed.) Taking chisel in hand, I proceeded to send you a letter re. your latest ish. (which I kept till the present years of turmoil to read: 3,450 P.B.)

Look... That (?) COVER. Help... How did that pass? First—Ye hero looks more like a Bem rather than a man. How did he get that Iriquois haircut? Full of muscles—naturally. Second—How can ye fem breathe in space? If ye hero needs a helmet why shouldn't the fem need same? Also I didn't read anything like that in the stories. Damn it, man, can't we ever get a cover that suits the mag.? Blub. Blub. Ha. Ha. Ha. I bought a mag. last year with a cover that fitted the story. (1942 S. S. S.)

THE LAST TWO ALIVE—Another operee by Sneary. Another theme on Adam and Eve. Oh well.

CARRY ME HOME—Ah. More. Pant. More.

MIGHTY MOUSE RIDES AGAIN—You know, something funny is going on around here. A few months ago I bought a pocketbook called "Invasion From Mars" with stories gathered by Orson Welles. Putting it away, I just picked it up one day before I got your mag. Opening the pocketbook, there was THE STAR MOUSE by F. Brown. Looking into PLANET there was MITKEY RIDES AGAIN. Something queer going on around here. Stories very good.

SIDEWINDERS FROM SIRIUS—Fair but

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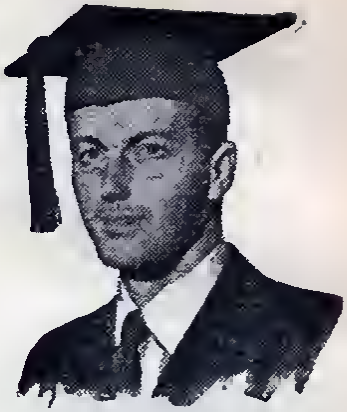

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sorta egotistical on ye hero's part. Why, oh why must there always be some sort of hero?

CARGO TO CALLISTO—Pretty good. Maybe more?

MACHINE OF KLAMUGRA—Hows about another sequel? There's gotta be a war between the Marties some time. People can't live together like that, y'know.

FINAL MISSION—Punk. The story broke off before we got anywheres. How about a follow-up to this one? Come on, Mac—give us a good one.

MARS IS HELLSOME—Veddy good, but who's the habe holding the book? The author? Ahem.

DIANITWITS—Purty good. You make me curious. I guess I'll have to huy the book some day just out of curiosity.

La (why La?) Viz—Nuts. It'll get good, though, when my letter gets in (ahem...) (I haven't any quotation marks.)

Just to let youse know—Re: James Stewart (star?) states Mercury is almost as heavy as lead. I heard that Mercury is heavier than lead. Am I right, Mr. Bix? (*You are wrong, Mr. Mitch.—Ed.*)

Whenever I write a letter and mention Isaac A. I'll try to get his name right. But if I don't, God help you if you show I. A. the letter with the wrong spelling. Salami I. A. Salami I. A.

The ills. were kinda good, but the ones for Mitkey were kinda... you know.

P.S.'s Feature Flash—Kinda good. More. More.

Yours stf. anatically,

DOUGLAS MITCHELL

F.M.A.N.G.A.L.P.
H.W.H.G.D.W.F.

P.S. Say can Rodric Cadwalleder Drinkwater be a real name? Gahhhhhhhhhh (and so on for a few lines).

PLEASANTLY SURPRISED . . .

79 Columbia St.,
Bridgeport, Conn.

DEAR EDITOR:

Up until now, I haven't been a consistent reader of PLANET STORIES, since, in my opinion, it definitely was not one of the better SF publications. But after reading your first hi-monthly issue, I have revised my rating of your magazine. It now is unquestionably on the rise and if you can continue to turn out yarns of the quality that were in the hig November issue, there is no douht in my mind that PLANET will soon be right up there with very best SF's on the market. To tell you the truth, I wondered why PLANET decided to go on a bi-monthly basis when, as a quarterly, it was turning out material of inferior quality. I decided to huy the first issue (call it a hunch) and I certainly was pleasantly surprised.

The November issue of PLANET contained one of the finest stories I have yet read in that publication. It was, namely, C. H. Liddell's deeply moving CARRY ME HOME. This story, unsung and unheralded as it was, took me completely hy surprise. Unless I am badly mistaken, this tale bids fair to become a real PLANET classic and would be a worthy addition to one of the many SF anthologies now appearing on the market.

CARRY ME HOME, to my mind, was indis-

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putably the best story in November PLANET, but there were others of exceptional quality and merit. Allen K. Lang's MACHINE OF KLAMUGRA ran second to Liddell's classic and Jay Drexel's CARGO TO CALLISTO along with Fox B. Holden's SIDEWINDERS FROM SIRIUS were stories of better than average interest.

I never did get around to reading Fredric Brown's original MITKEY but, frankly, after all the buildup, I was rather disappointed with MITKEY RIDES AGAIN. It was not an uninteresting tale by any means, but I guess I expected too much after all the ballyhoo.

MacDonald's FINAL MISSION was a fair little yarn, but in Coppel's THE LAST TWO ALIVE you diverted back to the old "Aram looked up at the naked girl before him" lewd type of story. I realize there are many readers who love that kind of literature, but I am not one of them. If I were, I would read DeMaupassant and Boccaccio instead of Science Fiction, which to me is a high form of literature and should be treated with dignity and respect

Yours truly,

IRVING SLAVIN

Thanks for the kind words, Irving, and we look forward to more of the same from Bridgeport... but since when is de Maupassant lewd? Or Boccaccio, for that matter?—Ed.

DOPE ON BRADBURY

4458 56th,
San Diego, Cal.

SIRS:

This is an open letter to the editor and fans of your magazine that has needed to be written for quite some time. My subject is the work of Ray Bradbury. I have been actively collecting Ray's stories in all fields and publications and have talked to him at length on several occasions in his studio, so I feel that I may speak with some authority on his work.

Let me begin by pointing out that Ray Bradbury is a very conscientious craftsman who takes a great deal of time on a story—as long as six months on a short. And he has been working four years on his major novel which, by the way, is semi-fantasy. The fans who have complained of his repetition in theme have merely to look to the masters in the arts. Most of the great symphonic composers began with a major theme and built variations on that theme in the ensuing movements. In the fields of writing and painting this also holds true. All of our modern-day "giants" have used the same theme time and again, developing its varied hues and colorations. To accuse Ray Bradbury of cheap repetition, of "selling the same story over and over," is extremely stupid and ill-informed.

Since Ray has begun to sell more of his work to the "slicks" there are those grudging fans who give vent to their frustrated envy in the form of petty attacks on Bradbury, written for both pro and fan zines. They complain that his "science" is inaccurate, that he dwells morbidly on death and that his conceptions of life are twisted and distorted. Let ns examine these points...

Bradbury's science is neither accurate nor inaccurate—it isn't science at all! He uses other worlds as does an actor use a painted stage, to

project his ideas and emotions a bit more purely and imaginatively than he could do on a realistic footing. He writes of mood and impressions, of the irony, the humor, the sadness, and the fragility of human existence...

Certainly, he writes of death. It is basic. We are born, we eat, we sleep, we live and we die. Death concerns every living being, human or otherwise, on this planet. Why not examine its many-faceted face and not cringe behind a mask and pretend it isn't there. Bradbury explores death as did the late Max Brand explore strength in its pure physical form. It is his privilege and it is neither morbid nor distorted. Let the shallow, superficial fan seek elsewhere if he lacks the literary understanding to appreciate Bradbury.

Ray pays special care to the harmonious over-all effect of each story. He wastes no words, building his ideas and dialogue toward a chosen climax. Each element is taken into account and not the least of these is the title. Ray believes that the title of a story should not conflict with its content. He keeps them strong and direct. Now in the case of DEATH WISH his title was THE BLUE BOTTLE, and DEATH BY RAIN was THE LONG RAINS. You, the editors, changed them both and in the case of tbe former ruined the atory by revealing all in the title. Other mags have made the same mistake—and it *is* a mistake, to change an author's title when he has considered it as a key in the effect of his story.

But enough of critical comment—PLANET has printed some great work by Ray Bradbury and deserves praise on this count. Stories like MILLION YEAR PICNIC, ZERO HOUR, PILLAR OF FIRE, FOREVER AND THE EARTH, ASLEEP IN ARMAGEDDON, etc., were first introduced to readers through your pages and since have been reprinted in various forms.

A lot of readers may have been wondering just what their boy has been up to of late and whether or not he intends to desert the field of fantasy. Well, the answer to that is a decisive NO. He recently sold THE SCREAMING WOMAN to FLAIR (No plug intended Mr. Editor—just a news note) and the POST recently ran one called THE WORLD THE CHILDREN MADE. As to his future plans he has a bat-full...

THE MARTIAN CHRONICLES, his last book, is undergoing screen adaptation with Ray lending a hand. M-G-M and other studios are anxious to film stories of his, and the New York agents are begging him to do a play. He is now seriously considering — AND THE MOON BE STILL AS BRIGHT as well as WAY IN THE MIDDLE OF THE AIR as prospects for the stage. His next book, a collection of short stories, will not be published until March '51. He calls it THE ILLUSTRATED MAN and it will contain a couple of yarns from PLANET as well as at least two or three brand new tales never before published. He showed me the cover jacket which be had designed bimself and a mock-up of the interior contents. His other book of stories, FROST AND FIRE, won't appear until after March. It is thougbt that a short fantasy novel called THE FIREMAN will appear as the lead with bis two novelettes from PLANET filling in the remainder—a rewritten version of CREATURES THAT TIME FORGOT and PILLAR OF FIRE.

He is also working on two other books—a collection of bits from his boyhood impressions of Illinois, and a book set in Mexico utilizing his

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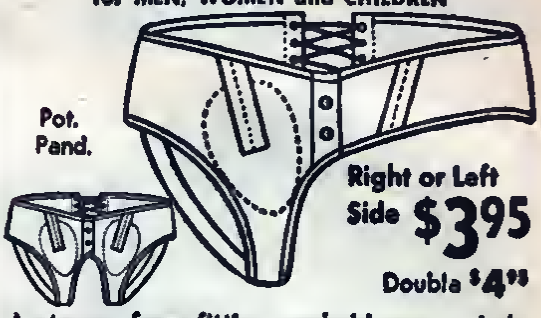

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novelette THE NEXT IN LINE as an end piece to be blended into the novel. But perhaps the most interesting news to the general fan is that he is tentatively scheduled to edit a pocket collection of little known fantasy tales by writers well-known in the realistic fields—Hemingway, Steinbeck, etc. Bradbury reads widely enough in other fields to bring to light some unusual stories.

As to his regular short story work he has an original coming out in an English publication soon and he told me of a new story he is working up—THE SHOP OF MECHANICAL SPIDERS—which is something to look forward to.

I hope the above data may bring his readers up to date on his activities. I would like to hear from any other Bradbury collectors at any time. Thanks for this opportunity of getting a few things ironed out in print. Wishing you much success in the future with PLANET I am,

Sincerely,

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DEAR MR. BIXBY:

I'm lost! I never thought the day would come when I would spend half-a-dollar to send my sentiments per air mail to any science fiction mag. But it's happened! And 'taint so bad neither.

Well, let's take a look at the ish:

Cover: As usual.

THE LAST TWO ALIVE: Don't you think this theme is a bit overworked? Even Coppel's fine writing seems to have taken a nosedive in this one.

CARRY ME HOME: Liddell at his best. I liked this one very much.

MITKEY RIDES AGAIN: Although I don't usually like this kind of stuff it was well-written.

SIDEWINDERS FROM SIRIUS: Very, very nice indeed.

MACHINE OF KLAMUGRA: I liked this one too.

CARGO TO CALLISTO: I'm sticking my neck out, but it's a Bradbury-ish kind of story better than any I've read by the "Bright-eyed Boy."

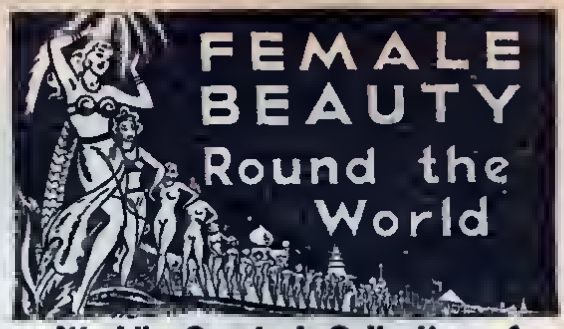
FINAL MISSION: To think that Johnny would do that to us! Oh well, it was a very short story anyway, though it seems to me you could easily have left it out. Nothing would have been missed, and La Vizi could have profited by the space. Adding up, you turned out a very nicely rounded issue, Mr. Bixby suh. Very, very nice indeed — but then one is rarely disappointed by PLANET.

What happened to Lin Carter this ish? I kinda look forward to reading his letters. (Yeah, I've found out he ain't a her).

Reckon that's all for now.

Scientifically yours,

RAMON VAN RENSBURG



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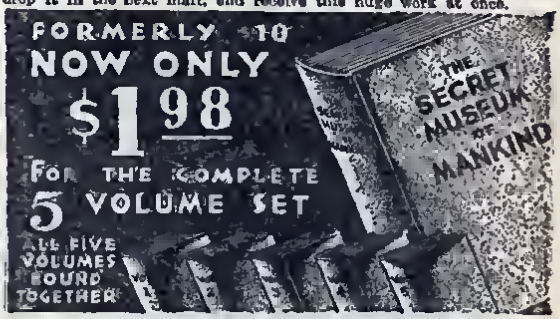

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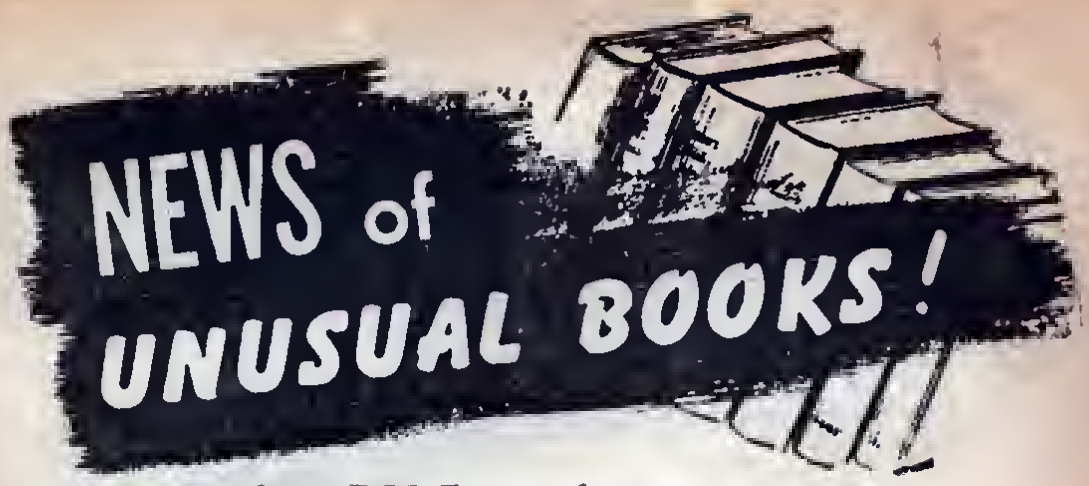

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